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ASSAMESE LITERATURE

HEM BARUA



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To

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

who is no more

FOREWORD

THIS is the second book in the Series that the National Book Trust has planned on "India—the Land and People".

The origin of the Series is the result of a discussion that I had with the late Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. When I first put the idea before him, he not only heartily approved it but gave many suggestions for making it more complete and attractive. It was his opinion that such a Series of books on India will form a permanent library of knowledge on every aspect of this country and is sure to make constructive contribution for national advancement in knowledge and education.

The Series proposes to cover every aspect of the country and will deal with its geography, geology, botany, zoology, agriculture, anthropology, culture, language etc. Its ultimate aim is to create a kind of comprehensive library of books on India. We have endeavoured to have the books written by acknowledged authorities on various subjects and in a scientific way. Every effort is being made to see that they are easily understandable by the ordinary educated reader. The factual knowledge regarding the various subjects concerning India would be available to any ordinary reader who is not a specialist and who would like to have a knowledge of the subject in a relatively simple language.

We have been fortunate in getting the guidance of leading experts and Scientists in various fields for this Project. In fact without their active cooperation it would not have been possible to plan the Series. We are thankful to our Board of Honorary Editors who are eminent specialists and leaders in their field for helping us in producing these volumes for the benefit of the ordinary reader.

One of the objects of the Series is to make it available in as many Indian languages as practically possible. The work of translating them in various languages will be taken up as soon as the original books are ready. In fact a few volumes might be originally written in some of the languages.

We have received full support from the Ministry of Education of the Government of India and the State Governments. They are lending their help in many ways not the least by permitting scientists working under them to write for the Series. I would like to take this opportunity of thanking them. Without their help it would not have been possible to undertake this enterprise of national utility.

I am very grateful to my colleague, Professor M. S. Thacker, Member of the Planning Commission, for agreeing to be co-Chief Editor. His enthusiastic collaboration has greatly helped in planning the Series successfully.

B. V. KESKAR

PREFACE

BARRING FOLK-SONGS, aphorisms and popular ballads that are anonymous like the Great Cathedrals of Europe, Assamese literature had come to acquire its written form under the auspices of pre-Vaishnava poets of the 13th century. Our ancient literary history can be broadly divided into two parts: (i) Pre-Vaishnava, from 1200 to 1450 A.D., and (ii) Vaishnava, from 1450 to 1650 A.D. It is during the latter period that Assamese literature attained its meridian splendour; the principal inspiration of this literature like that of art or any other Indian literature was religion. This and the thematic inspiration drawn mainly from Sanskrit sources show that our ancient literature was essentially pan-Indian in character.

The subsequent period under the Ahoms was one of historical literature known as *Buranjis*. Leaving aside verse, our prose that attained a high degree of accomplishment during the 16th century witnessed a significant enrichment in the chronicle literature of the Ahoms. Although prose flourished, it did not mean that poetry received no focus. Besides, the fact that the most significant works of this generation are translations from Sanskrit, *Gita-govinda*, *Sakuntala* and *Hitopadesa* shows that the pan-Indian character of our literature was maintained in a basic sense even under conflicting political loyalties.

Our modern period of literature began under American Baptist Mission auspices during the second quarter of the last century. It received further encouragement through English education and western literature that is responsible for the introduction of new forms and technique into our literature.

In *Assamese Literature*, I have tried to give a rapid survey of tendencies that have gone to make the history of our literature. Within the limited pages of the book, I have tried to be as fair in my appraisal as my limited mental capabilities allow. To be

precise, there is nothing learned or scholarly in this book, not the shadow of it. Here I must be positive about one thing; nothing else shall be a matter of greater satisfaction to me than to find this humble work succeed in its primary objective of making readers elsewhere know, at least something, of our literature.

It is gratifying to note that the National Book Trust, India proposes to publish a series of books on different cultures and literatures of our country. *Assamese Literature* is one such book of the series.

In writing this book I was greatly encouraged by Jawaharlal Nehru. It may not be out of place to add the following lines which I received from him :

I am glad to learn that you have written a book on the history of Assamese Literature for the National Book Trust. You can certainly dedicate it to me if you wish it.

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

The original dedication therefore was : "To Shri Jawaharlal Nehru, in admiration and affection." Now it is : "To Jawaharlal Nehru, who is no more." Alas, what an agonising difference !

In preparing this book Mr. Nanda Talukdar, Mrs. Anu Barua and Nakib Ahmed have helped me. I thank them all.

Shri Munin Dutta-Baruah has kindly allowed me to use on the jacket of the book a couple of paintings from the *Chitra Bhagavata*, a monumental work of 16th century paintings reproduced from Sankardeva's *Bhagavata*. I am greatly indebted to him.

HEM BARUA

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OLD ASSAMESE LITERATURE

language

THE TWO broad divisions of Indian languages are as follows: The modern Indian languages descended from Sanskrit and therefore called Indo-Aryan languages are Hindi-Urdu, Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati, Oriya, Assamese, Rajasthani (variation of Hindi), Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto and Kashmiri. The Dravidian languages are Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam. The racial composition of Assam has produced its distinct influence on the linguistic map of the State in general; different peoples and tribes from parts across the State's frontiers have met here and in the course of time, as things indicate, contributed to the growth and development of a common speech called Assamese. The word *Assamese* is an anglicised formation built on the same principle of English syntax as *Singhalese*, *Canarese* etc. The people call their land *Asom*, and the word that has been built on it to mean the language and the people who speak it is *Asomiya*.

Asom, a Sanskrit word, means "unparalleled" or "peerless". It is said that this word was used to describe the invincible might of the Ahoms who marched into this region in the 13th century from across the Patkai ranges. Besides this, there is another opinion about the origin of this name which relates to the uneven terrain and the scenic grandeur "without compeers", "non-pareil" of the land. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji says:

The late medieval period in the history of Assam under the Ahom kings was, as we have seen, a period of travail for Assam, when her various tribal peoples of Mongoloid origin—the original Bodos and others, and the Austric people allied to the Khasis, together with that strong group of Shan newcomers the Ahoms—were finally welded together as a single Assamese-speaking nation—the Aryan Assamese language having already taken shape at the beginning of this period from the Magadhi Prakrit and Apabhramsa dialects brought by settlers from Bihar and North Bengal during the greater part of the first millennium A.D.

As already pointed out, Assam originally meant the land which the Shans from Upper Burma conquered and consolidated in 1228. Through the long columns of history peoples from different corners and regions across its borders, peoples of different origin and ethnology, migrated into this land, fought and rambled in its beautiful valleys and hills, and as years passed, fertilised its sinews into a rich and solid entity. The principal races that have migrated into this land are Austro-Asiatics, Dravidians, Tibeto-Burmans, Mongoloids and Aryans. The earliest wave of people to come in was, as linguistic and morphological evidences show, the Austro-Asiatics. In India, the races of these people are found in Chhota Nagpur and the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Assam.

When after fully occupying it, the new province was constituted by the British in 1874, they extended the name (Assam) to mean the whole territory that came under their administration. Different peoples such as the Austro-Asiatics, Aryans, Dravidians and Mongoloids have made their contribution to this common speech, but the greatest impact is that of the Aryans and their socio-religious influences. It may be pointed out in this connection that the contribution made by the Maithili speech towards the composite character of the Assamese language is a major factor. It is often supposed that our language in its modern garb is an offshoot of the old *Kamarupi* which in its own turn contained a large mixture

of eastern Maithili elements. Hiuen Tsang, celebrated Chinese pilgrim, who visited Kamarupa in the 7th century A.D. during Bhaskar Varma's rule was of the opinion that the language of Kamarupa "differs a little from that of mid-India". It presupposes the existence of Magadhan element in modern Assamese language. Dr. Grierson who discovers linguistic affinities between Assam and North Bengal deduces Magadhi as the common source of all the eastern languages. He writes :

Magadhi was the principal dialect which corresponds to old eastern Prakrit. East of Magadha lay the Gauda or *Pracya* Apabhramsa, the headquarters of which was at Gaur in the present district of Malda. It spread to the South and South-East and here became the parent of modern Bengali. Besides spreading southwards Gauda Apabhramsa also spread to the east keeping north of the Ganges and is there represented at the present day by northern Bengali and in the valley of Assam by Assamese. North Bengal and Assam did not get their language from Bengal proper but directly from the west. Magadhi Apabhramsa, in fact, may be considered as spreading out eastwards and southwards in three directions. To the north-east it developed into northern Bengali and Assamese, to the south into Oriya and between the two into Bengali. Each of these three descendants is equally directly connected with the common immediate parent and we find North Bengali agreeing in some respects rather with Oriya spoken far away to the south than with Bengali of Bengal proper of which it is usually classed as a sub-dialect.

There are people who more often than not make hasty generalisations because of casual affinities between the Assamese language and the languages of northern Bengal districts and arrive at the conclusion of the former being an offshoot or *patois* of the latter; this is not true. The fact is explained by Dr. Grierson; subsequent researches on the subject by linguists like Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji and Dr. B. Kakati have established the independent character of the Assamese language. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji says :

The common dialect current in North Bengal and Assam continued as one speech, as a member of the Bengali-Assamese group of dialects. In the 15th century, it split up into two sections, Assamese and North Bengali, when Assamese started on a literary career and an independent existence of its own by not acknowledging the domination of literary Bengali, already established in East Bengal as well.

Ancient Kamarupa described by Hiuen Tsang, Chinese pilgrim of the 7th century, as Kama-lu-po, was an extensive kingdom; it covered a portion of modern North Bengal, and this may justifiably be adduced as an evidence to establish the fact of this linguistic affinity, as pointed out by Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji.

Besides this, there are other evidences to support the existence of a close cultural contact between Kamarupa on the one hand and Videha and Magadha on the other. The Aryan migrants who came to this land had their original pools in these two places; a considerable portion of the Aryan population living in Assam is from North Bihar. It was subsequently re-inforced by migration of people from Uttar Pradesh and other regions. This is how,—though Tibeto-Burman, Mongoloid and Austro-Asiatic dialects played a significant role in the formation of Assamese language as a composite speech,—the language came to be established as one of the Indo-Aryan languages in Assam.

It is seen that there are common words of every day use in the Assamese language that bear a close parallel to words in Hindusthani, Bihari, Oriya and other Indian languages and dialects. Concomitant to this, there are of course certain variations so far as ascendancy and descendency of meaning of common words are concerned when these are used in Assamese. It might be that these affinitive words descended from a common source and as they were used in different languages developed an individual or local content according to the demands of prevailing conditions. Over and above this, there are certain other words like *tagar* (a kind of flower), *barangani* (subscription) etc. in the Assamese language that bear a close affinity to words, for instance, in the

Marathi language; it is curious to note that these words are not found in Hindusthani. It might be due to some contact existing between the two regions in ancient times or due to race migrations. Or else it is difficult to explain this close and not casual linguistic affinity. The reasons given by K. N. Dikshit to justify archaeological affinities that exist between Assam and other parts of India may be the reasons also for linguistic affinities between these regions.

The affinities of Assamese art would seem to lie more with the schools of Bihar and Orissa than with the contemporary Pala art of Bengal. This is not unnatural as of the streams of influence that have moulded the culture of Assam, the strongest current has always been from North Bihar and mid-India.

Assamese is a composite language into which words of both Indo-Aryan and Indo-Chinese origin have made their way. Over and above this, other pre-Aryan and non-Aryan influences are also discernible, not only in loan-words but also in point of grammar, syntax and pronunciation. The Indo-Chinese group of languages is a large family divided into different sub-sections. The following list from Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji's *Kirata-Janakriti* will illustrate the distribution of Tibeto-Burman speeches in Assam and elsewhere.

TIBETO-BURMAN

- (a) Tibetan and its dialects;
- (b)-(c) the Himalayan group of dialects;
- (d) the North-Assam group—Aka, Miri, Abor, Dafla and Mishmi;
- (e) the Assam-Burmese group;
 - (i) the Bodo speeches—Bodo, Mech, Rabha, Garo, Kachari, Tipra;
 - (ii) the Naga dialects—Ao-Angami, Sema, Tangkhul etc.
 - (iii) the Kuki-Chin speeches of Manipur (Meithei or Manipuri), Tripura, Lushai Hills, as well as Burma;

- (iv) the Kachin (Singpho)—Lo group;
- (v) Burmese and its dialects.

In his book *Assamese: Its Formation and Development*, Dr. B. Kakati has pointed out the loan words of the Indo-Chinese group that are to be found in the Assamese vocabulary. They may be sub-classed under the following heads: (i) Austro-Asiatic: (a) *Khasi* (b) *Kolarian* (c) *Malayan*, (ii) Tibeto-Burman: *Bodo*; (iii) Thai: *Ahom*. Though the Khasis and Syntengs, principal races of the Monkhmer language group, lived an isolated life in the hills, it would be wrong to say that there were no cultural or commercial contacts between the hills and the plains so far as these people are concerned. Mainly due to commercial and cultural contacts with the Khasis and Syntengs of the Monkhmer language group, there were mutual borrowings of words. Dr. Kakati has provided a list of these loan-words in his book. Let me quote from him:

The Austric elements seem to constitute an essential substratum of Assamese vocabulary—the vocables that are regarded as indigenous in present day Assamese seem to have been mostly taken over from the Austric speakers.

The influence was mostly mutual; it cross-connected these two groups of people in point of linguistic interchanges and affinities.

The Monkhmer language family was succeeded by people of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family. Either they pushed a part of the existing population to the hills or gradually superimposed their speech on them. The dialect of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family belongs to three distinct groups: (i) *Naga*, spoken in the Naga Hills, (ii) *Kuki-Chin*, spoken in the Manipur Hills, some parts of Cachar and the Lushai Hills, (iii) *Bodo* comprises all the non-Aryan elements of Assam Valley and North Cachar. The Ahoms, Khamtis, Turangs, Phakials, Noras and the like belong to the Siamese-Chinese group of languages. At present, the people belonging to this language group are found mostly in eastern Assam.

Of all the language groups obtainable in the State, the Tibeto-Burman is by far the largest; this honeycomb of people contains

a wide variety of racial cells. The largest of this is the Bodo language group. Kacharis, Kochas, Rabhas, Hojais, Lalungs, Garos, Morans and Chutiyas,—all these people belong to this great family of languages. Most of them speak different dialects, but have together contributed to the growth and formation of the Assamese language. The home of the Bodo language group is mainly in the Brahmaputra valley; almost all the hill tribes with the exception of the Khasi-Synteng language group belong to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages.

The Ahoms as they advanced and conquered Assam used their own language; this language of the Ahoms was a dialect of the Shan family which is a member of the Siamese-Chinese language group. The Siamese-Chinese language group belongs to the Indo-Chinese constellation of languages. Though the Ahoms ruled in this land for about six hundred years, the survival of Ahom words in Assamese vocabulary is significantly meagre. Such words as *lang* which means “back”, *pung* meaning “mine”, *pukha* meaning “offshoot”, *kareng* meaning “palace” and some others attached to river and place names *viz.* *Namrup*, *Namsang*, *Namdang* etc. are a few survivals of Ahom words in modern Assamese.

The Ahoms no doubt built an empire in Assam, but the pressure from the bottom *en masse* was such that the captors, so far as linguistic and cultural history is concerned, became ultimately the captives. Finally, they abandoned their own language and adopted and assimilated the language of the people they ruled; the only people today who have an elementary knowledge of their language are the *deodhais* and *bailungs*, tribal astrologers and priests. About the extinction of the Ahom language, Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji says thus :

The Ahoms lost their language entirely for two reasons; first they were much fewer in number when compared with the Bodos and others; and secondly, they were certainly more receptive to new ideas, and were in temperament more adaptive.

The Bodos have a much wider range of influence on the Assamese language; the survival of Bodo names of rivers till today bears

testimony to this fact. *Di* or *ti* prefixes used before different river-names as Di-bong, Di-sang etc. in the Brahmaputra valley mean "water" in the Bodo language; these are Bodo river-names. Likewise, the Assamese language influenced the different Bodo dialects, particularly in point of loan-words. In the course of time, these non-Aryan speakers were compelled by historical forces to be bilingual and by one step out of it, most of them ultimately became Assamese speakers. Through this there was a sort of linguistic interfusion which led in time into a synthesis of different races. The two forces that worked towards this fulfilment in early times are: (i) the Ahom rule, and (ii) the Vaishnava movement that touched Assamese life in its core and quintessence.

The Dravidians of Assam have lost both their racial and linguistic identities. Philologists are of the opinion that the earliest linguistic formation recognisable in India is the Dravidian. Though it exists and is spoken in many parts of India today, the case is different so far as Assam is concerned. In Assam it is submerged by more powerful linguistic influences. Though not very significant, there is a percentage of Munda element in the formation of Assamese language. Logan is of the opinion that the Munda language is an intermixture of Dravidian and Monkhmer dialects. There are other linguists who hold a different view; they are of the opinion that it has greater affinity with the Monkhmer family of languages than with any other, as linguistic evidences show.

It is a moot point whether or not the Mongolian dialects found an existing Dravidian basis that helped the formation of their language. Logan holds that the Dravidian language lies at the basis of different Naga and Bodo languages. Dr. Grierson dismisses this view as wholly untenable. It is a fact that in the course of time the more powerful Aryan and Bodo languages completely obliterated the prevalent Monkhmer dialects in the hills as well as in the plains except in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills where a dialect of the Monkhmer family still exists and is developing into a language. The different Bodo dialects are used today by more than half a million people.

There are different reasons why Mongoloid tribes as the Ahoms, Rabhas and the rest have forsaken their tribal dialects to a considerable extent in favour of the Assamese language. Assamese is the language of the Hindu priests; in the process of conversion of these people from tribal beliefs to Hinduism, the priests introduced their own language. The Tibeto-Burmans and the Mongoloids invaded Assam from the north-east; the Aryans did it from the north-west. The reference to the kingdom of Kamarupa and its people in the *Epics* and *Puranas* testifies to the fact of the Aryan priests and warriors coming to Assam at a very early date; they brought with them their Hindu religion and the priests their Sanskrit language as the medium of ethical expression. These diverse influences from different sources have combined to make the Assamese language an important member of the Indo-Aryan family of languages. On the other hand, this must also be recognised that the Assamese language is surrounded on all sides by different languages and dialects of the Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Chinese family. Though imperceptible, this accounts for the Indo-Chinese character of the Assamese Language, primarily described as a member of the Indo-Aryan family of languages.

popular songs and ballads

OLD ASSAMESE literature, except Dak Mahapurusa's didactic aphorisms, was either lyrical or pastoral or heroic. Before Indian literature like sculpture and art in medieval Europe came under the "dominant sway of religion", it was by its very nature a popular expression, essentially lyrical in inspiration and uncontaminated by any doctrinal ideas. The history of Assamese literature of this period, a period that is difficult to circumscribe, is a history of people's literature, mostly poetical in theme and output. Folk-songs and ballads of the people's age are crystallised into the living language of the people, untouched by learned influences coming from outside. Popular poetry escaped the blight of "learned influences" by clinging fast to the spoken language. On the other hand, the spoken language of the people under its influences continued to draw its sap from the soil as a medium of literary expression.

True it is that judging from the point of language, the folksongs appear to be refreshingly modern; this might be due to their inherent dynamic character. But judging from the sentiments, images and spiritual absorption which these songs express, they must be of a pristine civilisation, a civilisation of a simple unsophisticated people which justifies their antiquity. It is possible for a mother in a pristine civilisation only to ask a needle from the moon

to sew a bag for money to be kept in so that with the money thus saved she might buy an elephant for her child to ride on.

Literature of the people's age was of the unwritten variety; it was by and large preserved in the vaults of people's memory. Of this literature, some scholars are of the opinion that "the marriage songs of Assam and a few pastoral ballads are the only literary productions that have come down to the present age". This popular poetry represents the art of the people and constitutes a literature transmitted through generations with its roots deep in the soil. The skill in words, love of beauty, tenderness of feelings and serenity of reflection as represented in this poetry have made a distinctive contribution to the growth and development of later-day Assamese poetry. The language of this popular poetry is lucid and unobtrusive; it exhibits a simple refined beauty unknown to the dark ages when black arts and magic were elaborately practised and literature consisted mainly of *tantras* and *mantras*, versified spells and charms.

(i) *Bihugits and Bongits* :

The history of Assamese poetry is replete with the rich folk-music of the past. The people of Assam still observe a sort of pagan devotion to nature, manifested in popular festivals that are associated with the change of seasons; these popular festivals marking the advent of spring and autumn are called *Bihus*. Poetry by common consent is the oldest form of literary expression; long before man wrote down his thoughts, he expressed them in songs *i.e.* in rhythmical language. The *Bihu*-songs speak of such an origin. The following are a few specimens :

(i)

I looked to the bamboo tops to see
which one is straight;
I looked into the face of my beloved,
O, it was a full-moon.

(ii)

Your eyes are like those of a fawn,
your breasts are like two lotuses;

Your hands are like lotus-stalks,
covered with silken cloths.

Spontaneous in passion and thought, *Bihu*-songs are composed mostly in couplets; each couplet usually embosses one crystallised emotion. Most of these songs are amorous in the sense that they are youthful songs calculated to accord to the dreams and aspirations of the season of youth. They are characterised by sweetness, lucidity and tender shades of suggestion and evocation. From a careful survey of the *Bihu*-songs we find that they express not only the mood of light amorous flirtation, but also every mood that the human mind is heir to.

Some of the *Bihu*-songs are ostensibly symbolic; there is in them a certain level of submerged meaning, "twin levels", as W. G. Archer defines it. In such poems an image is used on "twin levels", the understanding of which serves as a clue to submerged meanings; this is worked out through the interaction of the two levels.

I crawled into the gateway
of my love's father,
and she did not wash the stains
off my clothes.

There are other *Bihu*-songs in which the red *riha* i.e. a girl's breast-cloth or the bamboo tree is used as a symbol of ripeness for young girls; all this is connected in a symbolic way with the "procreative urge" of the earth or of woman. The *sendur* or vermilion put in the parting of a girl's hair is a sex-symbol; the vermilion-mark is a blood substitute. This mark on the forehead as also in the parting of a girl's hair symbolises the fact of her maturity and the capacity to receive and hold. *Red* appears frequently in *Bihu*-songs as a colour-scheme; the meaning is symbolic.

The banyan tree adorns itself
with new leaves;
My darling adorns herself
with a red *riha*.

With *Bihu*-songs, the custom of improvisation still continues as with any other folk-composition; this is mainly because of the mobile felicity they possess. There are instances of interpolations even of common English words that have gone as current coins into the language; this has not however affected in any tangible way the popular structure of the song. Folk-songs are inherently creative; without the creative urge, the dynamic vitality of the people will be lost. The following *Bihu*-song, definitely of the post-tea plantation era, is an apt instance in improvisation.

Titi kinu tita phul
Jorhatar golap phul,
Chenimora bagicar oi chithi.

A prolific variety allied in spirit to the *Bihugits* are *Bongits*. *Bongits* are of the nature of woodman's ballads of the west. The natural haunts of rural landscape are the springs of these songs; they are born amidst the deep silences of scenes where the heart usually pulsates with an imperceptible rhythm. Engaged as he is in the field of harvest, the peasant sings. Rearing *endi* and *muga* cocoons in the mulberry grove, he sings. Drawing the fishing net in silent lagoons or leisurely paddling his boat in the stream, he sings. Primarily these are the occasions when the peasant gives his soul away to music.

These popular songs are the inevitable results of moments of self-absorption and free emotional abandon. There is often a measure of dreamy imaginativeness in these songs which adds to their intensity. The following is a *Bongit*, translated by Dr. B. K. Barua :

My mind turns from the field, O darling,
 Of my home I grow weary,
 With the buoyant fleece I strive to fly,
 For without thee my life is dreary.
 Bright is the day with sunbeam,
 The night with mellow moonbeam;
 Brighter still is my darling's face,
 Shining in the full-moon's gleam.

These songs generally contain a certain melancholy emotion and vague mystic drift, replete with the purest of romantic elements.

(ii) *Nawariagits* :

Nawariagits or waterman's songs like *Bongits* are marked by a spirit of spontaneous joy and flowing grace. They are to a certain extent like the *Bhatiali* songs of Bengal, *bhata* evidently meaning downstream. This is possible that the *Nawariagit* originated when the boatman leisurely paddled his boat or drifted along with the current of the water without having to ply his oar. In this connection, it will be revealing to quote from Major John Butler's account : *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam* (1885) :

Assam is intersected by rivers; the Assamese prefer moving about in the little canoes to travelling by land; watermen seem greatly to enjoy these boat-trips for they are always singing songs as they paddle along.

This is true in the case of all riparian people. In those days before the invasion of the province by railways or other means of road-transport, rivers naturally played a prominent part in the life of the people as principal thoroughfares of communication; this is why rivers featured largely in songs and ballads. The following is a song translated by Major John Butler.

Come and join this merry round
 Tripping over Cupid's ground,
 Rama, Krishna, Hurry.
 Dance and sing we all night long,
 This shall be the only song,
 Rama, Krishna, Hurry.
 Love and music all the theme,
 Till the ruddy morning beam,
 Rama, Krishna, Hurry.
 Let the ruddy morn arrive
 It shall but our song revive,
 Rama, Krishna, Hurry.

Aided by the solar ray,
 Blithe we will sing through the day
 Rama, Krishna, Hurry.
 Let the shadow upwards tend,
 Let the weary sun descend,
 Still our songs shall find no end,
 Rama, Krishna, Hurry.

Some of the boat-songs, particularly popular in western Assam, are noted for their robustness of expression and inspiration drawn from Vaishnava themes. “*Kanai*, ferry me across the river” is an imploration of Radha to Krishna, and in this context the latter’s conduct is that of a crafty ferryman. This is a real gem of poetry set in a picture of romantic assurance.

*Kanai par karahe, belir diki cuwa,
 nasta haila dudher bhandar, bazar goila boiya*

.....

*Anya Radha par kaile laibo ana ana,
 toi Radha par kaile laibo kanar sona.*

Though actually not folk-songs of the boatman-type, there are other popular songs also as the *Baramahigit* bearing on the life of rivers. The *Baramahi*-song speaks of the expansive river-borne trade of the time and the natural impact on the mind of a lonely wife whose husband is away for a long time in the river for trade. Its dramatic intensity easily compares with that Chinese poem translated by Ezra Pound: *The Sailor’s Wife*. Strictly speaking, though its note is secular, *Baramahigit* ends in a distinctive note of spiritual exaltation in the spirit of Vaishnava poetry. The picture of the lovelorn maiden is poignant and significant.

*Aharar mahot Radha adharma barisana,
 Pushpare palangite Radhe karila sayana;
 Pushpare palangite Radhe nahila ghumati,
 Kaika gaila pranatanthe nahila ulati.*

The constant allusion to mythopoetic Radha’s restlessness due to pangs of separation is picturesque and also evocative of an atmos-

phere. *Kaina Baramahi*, another poem of this variety, is a dialogue of a lovelorn maiden with a vagrant whom she happens to come across. Each line of this story-poem wells up with fragments of broken sighs. In the manner of the Assamese *Baramahi*-song there are *Baramasi*-songs in Orissa and *Chaumasa* songs that sing of the monsoon months in Bihar. This type of songs describing the agony of lonely women due to separation enjoys a much wider tradition.

Other story-poems on different themes are *Pagala Parvatir git*, *Pachala Kirtan*, *Sipini Kirtan* etc. *Pagala Parvatir git* has the rhythm of *Bihu*-songs. The poem is non-serious in its intent and purpose; it depicts Lord Shiva in a popular light. Side by side with popular songs that are either romantic or spiritual, there are songs as the above that are noted for their gaiety and piercing popular wit.

(iii) *Biyanams and Nichukanigits* :

Old Assamese literature is equally rich in *Biyanams* (marriage-songs) and *Nichukanigits* (cradle-songs). Marriage is an elaborate process; consequently it has inspired a considerable number of songs. Most of these songs are of a documentary character and do not have much of symbolic significance. The rituals of bath both for the bride and her groom are attended by songs of haunting melody. The following is an example :

The girl finished her bath,
and asked her mother :
what clothes shall I put on ?

The mother says :

Put on such a cloth
that dries up in the shade,
and can be pressed into the palm.

In another marriage-song, the beauty of the girl is emphasised thus :

Why are you making her up
with tamarind paste ?
She is herself a *ketaki* blossom.

Many of the marriage-songs contain direct allusions to epic legends. Indispensable as they are in different rituals, these songs are believed to possess a sort of spiritual significance to the marital life of the couple. There are graceful nuptial songs that describe mythological marriage scenes of Hara-Gauri, Rama-Sita, Usha-Aniruddha and the like, drawn almost to lyrical raptures. The heritage of an ancient religious culture dovetailed into folk-experiences is evident in most of these songs. Sri Rama symbolises the ideal man for nuptial life and Sita the ideal woman, Shiva and Parvati approximating them closely. There are on the other hand songs that distinctly reveal influences of Vaishnava sentiment and expression.

Weep not little maiden,
scatter not thy necklace;
Truly shall I unite thee
with Madhava.

This song recalls to the mind the pre-nuptial days of Rukmini, a theme infinitely dear to the women-folk of Assam. This theme finds expression not only in marriage-songs but often times in cradle-songs also.

There is a class of marriage-songs called *Joranams*, i.e. "teasing songs". Though invariably offensive in language and spirit, these are mirthful songs of an innocent nature against the serene and serious background of marriage ritual. According to W. G. Archer, these taunting and mocking songs result in the "release of repressed energy which when applied to the marriage must necessarily make it fertile". Here is an example of this song:

The bridegroom's sister
sits with the people,
with her head wide as a basket;
The people are afraid of her,
lest some goblin has come.

Fresh and innocent like the child, *Nichukanigits* or cradle-songs are noted for their haunting music and tender feelings natural

to the theme. Often they unfold moods and aspirations of the child and at other times depict simple episodes dear to childhood imagination. These are songs of "pleasant illogicality", to use Tagore's words, with which the child's mind is coloured. Thus the child is transported on the wings of melody and fancy to a magic world of dreams through these lyrical rhapsodies; they are generally replete with homely images and imageries. *Lai hale jale abeli batahe* is rich in suggestion while *Sialie nahibi rati* in faery grace that inevitably touches the fringes of childhood imagination with "pleasant illogicality". Likewise, *Jonbai e beji ata diya* is a delicious little song that depicts a fanciful dialogue between a mother and the moon in the sky; the mother wants an elephant for her child to ride on; she starts by asking for a needle from the moon.

O moon, give me a needle;

What for do you want a needle ?

Just to stitch a bag with;

What for do you want a bag ?

Just to put money in;

What for do you want money ?

Just to buy an elephant with;

What for do you want an elephant ?

Just for the child to ride on.

etc. etc.

The history of Assamese folksongs and that of Vaishnava poetry often times presents a history of mutual influences. For instance, this might be said that the popular nursery rhymes or cradle-songs with their kindergarten setting influenced considerably the composition of Sridhar Kandali's exquisite *Kankhowa* poem, noted for its soft-as-snow-dust verse. Krishna's mother Yasodadevi sings:

Sleep, O ye Kanai,

O, the Ear-Eater is coming,

After devouring the ears of all the children;

He comes to thee.

The prevailing nursery sentiment and the popular conception of the imaginary ear-eater must have inspired this Vaishnava poem;

this conception does not even have a remote reference in *Bhagavatam* or *Harivamsam* from which our Vaishnava poets usually borrowed their themes. The poet's deep insight into the child's heart reveals itself in *Kankhowa*, a poem where the child is adopted as a medium through which divine exaltation is brought into an inspiring focus. Yet, the poem is pre-eminently popular in appeal. It is one of the best poems in our child's garden of verses. In the same way, the following is a popular nursery rhyme on which the influence of Vaishnava poetry is clearly evident.

My darling boy has herded the cattle,
His teeth shine in the sunbeam;
I have kept for him curd, milk and sweets,
I have kept for him a golden bed with pillows.

This nursery rhyme is couched particularly in an admixture of words natural to Vaishnava poetry. It not only flashes across the mind childhood portraits suffused with maternal tenderness but also deepens the childhood pictures in a sense of Madhavdeva of the Vaishnava school. It can be noted in this connection that the conception of *nama*, meaning "songs", affixed to these folk-songs, is directly a Vaishnava concept. Nevertheless, it is doubtless that these popular songs and poems represent the art of the people, the great mass of unknown creators of songs.

(iv) *Dehbicarar Gits and Jikir Songs:*

The *Dehbicarar gits* are a class apart; in attitude and modulation, they differ considerably from the prevailing tradition of folk-poems. The principal *motif* of these songs is spiritual absorption that speaks in general terms of the futility of man's life and the presence of a higher impulse that guides man's destiny. Because of this pronounced spiritual bias, it is often presumed that these metaphysical lyrics are the offspring of Vaishnava inspiration. This presumption acquires an added credence due to the fact that very often than not these songs are found interspersed with *bhanitas* that go in the name of Madhavdeva, sixteenth century Vaishnava saint-poet; some of them have the *ghosa-pada* arrangement in the manner of Vaishnava poetry; these might be later-day interpolations.

In this connection, this must not be forgotten that Buddhistic *tantrism* prevailed in Assam even before the rationalised thought-system of Vaishnavism emerged; apart from its other aspects, *tantrism* is also saturated with certain metaphysical ideas and dogmas of a similar nature. It had several denominational creeds and cults codified into systems like *Ratikhowa*, *Purna-seva*, *Ritia*, *Karanipatia* etc. These creeds are known for their erotic and bacchanalian symbolism; they comprise a sort of nihilistic doctrine which the Buddhist *siddhas*, except Gorakhshapa, taught. To say in a nutshell, they constitute a religion of sexual promiscuity.

Judged in this context, *Dehbicarar gits* seem to draw their inspiration from these metaphysical sources rather than from Vaishnavism. The *varagis*, a class of wandering minstrels like the *bauls* of Bengal ("fools of God"), sing these lyrics; they are an esoteric sect whose avowed aim is to deny the common run of life and see the maze of creation in the light of their own spiritual insight and conscience. Very often than not, the inner understanding of these lyrics is veiled in inexplicable mystery.

The soul is the sure signature of life,
That is how creation is understood;
Devotion to votaries and absorption in God,
And this is how life gets liberated.

The *Jikir* songs are in a sense an Islamic counterpart of *Dehbicarar gits*; these songs were composed during the reign of Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696) by a Muslim divine, Ajan Pir by name. *Jikir* means "spiritual chants"; the dominant idea of the futility of life and man-made institutions common to both the groups of songs, *Jikir* and *Dehbicarar git*, marks out their spiritual affinity. Except a few words of Arabic and Persian origin interspersed in the texture of the former, their diction, syntax and language are almost of a similar nature. Even the Vaishnava concept of *nama* appears to be the spiritual inspiration of these *Jikir* songs to a certain extent; "*nama* is the charioteer that goes with life".

I have read *lilim* and *Kalma* too,
everything slips, and slips by;

What is written in one's destiny,
There is no escape from it.

Through most of these *Jikirs* the idea of illusion, resignation to Allah and an over-powering desire to lose one's identity with Him runs in the way of Sufistic doctrines; it must be noted that Sufism has many features common with our Vaishnavism. The *Jikirs*, to be more precise, reflect the idea of Sufism as defined by Reynold A. Nicholson (*Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*) in the following way. "The soul, being divine in its essence, longs for union with that from which it is separated by the illusion of individuality, and this longing aspiration, which urges it to pass away from selfhood and to rise on the wings of ecstasy, is the only means whereby it can return to its original home." With both *Jikirs* and *Dehbicarar gits*, it is "mantic ecstasy", as the Greeks say.

(v) *Ballads* :

The oldest extant ballads so far known and discovered in Assamese literature are *Phulkonwar* and *Manikonwar*; being popular ballads, these were not originally written compositions, but were transmitted orally from generation to generation. Like the Homeridae, a clan who devoted themselves to the recitation of Greek epics before they were finally inscribed on paper, the *varagis*, a clan of indigenous minstrels, used to recite these ballads often on festive occasions or in ceremonial gatherings; thus these popular ballads came to live on the lips of men. It is because of this oral tradition that they show evidences of new and newer interpolations as times passed and manners changed; it is mainly because of this that these ballads reveal snapshots of Assamese life and society not only of the remote past but also of comparatively later times. In juxtaposition of plot, story interest and characterisation, these two ballads stand out as landmarks in the history of Assamese ballad-literature. In a sense, these are novels in verse in very much the same way as Thomas Hardy's *The Dynasts* may be described as history in the attire of verse.

Like the oldest extant *Chanson de geste* in French Literature *The Song of Roland*, *Manikonwar* is possibly the oldest extant ballad in

Assamese literature. Compact in spirit, lucid and direct in style, devoid of all superfluous ornamental appendages, it has little in common with the manner of medieval metrical romances like the *harana* and *vadha kavyas*. The ballad *Manikonwar*, full of digressions, is about Sankaladiva's son Prince Mani.

*Sankaladiva rajare putak Manikanesare
Gat khati khune nai.*

As to king Sankaladiva with whose name the story part of the poem opens, there are variant readings in available texts; in some, it is Sankaradevaraja. There is no evidence of a king of either of these names ruling in ancient Kamarupa. Although attempts have been made by scholars to fix this legendary king into a particular historical epoch, there is no authentic record available in respect of Sankaladiva's reigning time, except a nominal reference in Ferista's History. Sir E. A. Gait is of the opinion that "Sankaladiva founded the city of Lakhnauti, which it is said remained the capital of Bengal for 2000 years". Whatever it maybe, there is no doubt that Sankaladiva's name has passed into history perhaps as a legendary figure; these popular ballads, *Phulkonwar* and *Manikonwar* have grown round this quasi-historical personality.

There are interesting digressions in *Manikonwar*, specially one on the virtues of an ideal wife and the various sentiments associated with it. Child Manikonwar maturing into adulthood married Kanchanmati; it is here that the balladist introduces social glimpses of the time. Although there is no special reason for a presumption of this kind except that the hero of the latter poem is said to be the posthumous son of the former, *Manikonwar* ballad seems to grow into *Phulkonwar* ballad; it is a popular song noted for its poignancy of emotion.

My father is carried away
by the white elephant,
And enthroned monarch of his dominion;
My mother is taken away
by the marine merchant.

Though the style is more often than not digressive, the poem contains some fine descriptive snapshots. These ballads, *Manikonwar* and *Phulkonwar* breathe in their psychological approach the very spirit of innocence and simplicity. The authors' genius for depicting life and visualising scenes of the remote past is admirably exhibited in the ballads. Like *The Song of Roland* growing at least through three centuries, from the 8th to the 11th, *Phulkonwar* and *Manikonwar* grew through ages as evident from the pictures in the poems depicting different stages of social growth. What remained possibly a trifle at the beginning grew into a full-fledged work of imagination as time passed. In both the ballads, the story is told swiftly and lucidly without any superficial austerity.

Besides *Juna gits*, a class of ballads by itself, the other most well-known ballads are *Janagabharur git* and *Barphukanar git*. Judging from the point of language and the socio-historical pictures portrayed in them, these ballads appear to be of the later Ahom period. Like *Mayamaria ranuar git*, another later-day composition that may succinctly be described as a political poem inciting the Moamarias to revolt, *Janagabharur git* is a ballad of brave deeds and romance. Jana is the principal woman character in the ballad and Gopican is its hero. Though the canvas is limited, the poem presents a graphic picture of life under the Ahoms. The allusion to "cheni vanarasi" in the poem connects it with a much later date, if, of course, this reference to "Banaras sugar" is not a later-day interpolation.

Dubala Santir git is a romantic ballad; it narrates the desperate love of a merchant's son for a pretty woman who was already married. A flower-woman takes pity on the young man and carries his message of love to Dubala; the rest of the poem records the woman's reaction to the suggestion. By the abrupt way this narrative ends, it seems to be either an unfinished poem or a poem the whole of which is yet to be recovered.

Historical events stirring people's imagination have given rise to popular songs and ballads through ages. Joymati, the tragic queen of history, with her unflinching devotion to her husband has inspired a rich corpus of patriotic songs and ballads. Her

eminent son Rudra Singha, who ascended the throne in 1696 after his father, had dedicated a temple and a tank to the memory of his mother. These concrete symbols of respect to her martyrdom have inspired the creative impulse of poets and artists through time. Likewise, *Barphukanar git* is a powerful historical ballad composed against the background of Burmese invasion of Assam and the internecine strife leading to this catastrophe. The poem is noted for lively descriptions enlivened with touches of patriotic *elan*.

Maniram Dewanar git, a song of Maniram's self-sacrifice on the altar of freedom under the British, is a ballad of haunting melody. Maniram Dewan was born in 1806; he was twenty years old when Assam lost her freedom to the British in 1826. When the Indian Sepoy Mutiny raged, he is said to have organised the revolution in the eastern part of our country to "drive the British out". Maniram's plans were discovered and he was awarded a death-sentence as the *fons et origo* of this revolutionary crusade; his execution took place in 1858. *Maniram Dewanar git*, an absorbing poem by all standards, is a fitting tribute by a grateful people to the memory of this patriot. It is perhaps the youngest historical ballad in Assamese literature. Natural outbursts of an unsophisticated people, what is reflected in these songs and ballads is living and vivid thought and spontaneity of feeling. The verse form generally employed in ballads is the quatrain; these are rarely marked by irregularities of prosody or intricacies of rhyme.

The efflorescence of old Assamese poetry lies not exactly in the studied literary ventures of individual poets, but in the great mass of anonymous compositions, the spontaneous songs of the people. The best poetry is that which in the long run pleases the greatest number. Folk-poetry is "best" poetry in this sense of the term. The *Bongits* and *Bihugits* coming directly from the nightingale throats of the people are universal in appeal. With them may be mentioned ballads like *Phulkonwar* and *Manikonwar* which revivify a romance-oriented tradition and an atmosphere of dreams and aspirations.

Each bard, as he sang them, handled the existing materials freely, rejecting or adding portions as the occasions demanded; these poems were handed down from one generation to another and finally by applying the artistic principle of rejection and selection, some one must have combined them into long narratives of the type of *Phulkonwar* and *Manikonwar*. This in most cases is the origin of folk-epic or ballad; various sections of the same poem according to folk-aesthetics are produced by different people through several generations. It is for this reason that the life depicted in ballads like *Phulkonwar* and *Manikonwar* is one of Ahom times, though the allusion is to a legendary prince.

OLD ASSAMESE literature remained in an unwritten state till a few centuries back. The aphorisms of Dak Mahapurusa are known to be the earliest collection of popular literature in our language; the date of this literature has not yet been finally fixed. It is pointed out in the *Asomiya Sahityar Chaneki* that the “peculiarity of his (Dak Mahapurusa’s) language leaves little doubt that it belonged to a time prior to that of Sankardeva, the father of Assamese literature”. Scholars however differ in their opinion about it. The occasional interpolations of words of Arabic and Persian origin in Dak’s *vachanawalis*, sayings and aphorisms, naturally lead scholars to conclude that Dak Mahapurusa belonged to a much later date. These conflicting opinions studied *pari passu* lead to interesting results.

Though Dak Mahapurusa has been often claimed to be a native of Lehidangra near Barpeta, Kamrup, nothing is more precisely known about this half-legendary popular poet of great wit and wisdom; his origin is veiled in mystery. Like distance lending enchantment to the view, here is an instance of mystery lending greatness to the soul. On the other hand, it is presumed by some that no such personality called Dak actually existed. It may be that popularly Dak came to be a symbol of wisdom to whom,—in order to impart a coherent credence,—all popular sayings and utterances of wit and wisdom were ascribed.

The honour of being the birth-place of Dak Mahapurusa is claimed by more than one geographical region. It is not possible to presume with any authority the place to which he really belonged. Moreover, the aphorisms of Dak exist in more than one language without any tangible variation. It is probably due either to the homogeneity in the fundamentals of culture connecting adjoining regions in the past or due to the fact that these popular poets wandered about as minstrels singing the songs they composed. In the process of wandering they must have left behind them portions, if not all, of their compositions which with certain local modulation or without it went into the cultural fabric of different regions. Whatever it maybe, there had grown a corpus of didactic literature the authorship of which is ascribed to Dak Mahapurusa.

Similar to European literature written in Greece about the middle of the 8th century B.C., the aphorisms of Dak Mahapurusa constitute the earliest extant didactic compositions in Assamese literature. It may be that like the Greeks ascribing their aphorisms to Hesiod about whom many fastidious stories have arisen, these aphorisms, popular alike in Assam, Bengal, Bihar and Nepal, were ascribed to Dak Mahapurusa. These wise maxims are mostly in verse form; they tell peasants and people how to conduct themselves and when to perform certain rites, tasks relating to agriculture, marriage, social relations, etc. These compositions are significant for the account they give of customs, beliefs and rules of conduct prevailing in the regions concerned from early times. In brief, they throw a flood of light on the socio-economic and intellectual structure of ancient society and its standard of attainments.

The aphorisms of Dak Mahapurusa reflect the spirit of the age, the principle of Buddhistic ethics and morality. Recent researches have revealed that Buddhism which flourished far and wide and extended into Burma and beyond (*Buddhism in Burma* by G. Appleton) thrived in a certain way in ancient Kamarupa also. It is true that the impact of Buddhistic culture on our life and morals was never very strongly felt. It is because when

Buddhism came to Assam, it was already in its declining phases; nevertheless, its impact on Assamese life and literature, from the point of history, is not without significance. There are allusions in the aphorisms of Dak Mahapurusa to the Buddhistic doctrine of *dharma*, the cardinal principle of life,—of providing wells and tanks by solitary road-sides for travellers.

*Jave dharma kariba jani,
Pukhuri khandia rakhiba pani,
Briksa roponata adhika dharma
Matha mandapa sobhana karma,
Anitya dehata nahike as,
Dhane jane bastre kiba bisvas.*

In conclusion, this might be said that the wise sayings of Dak Mahapurusa have lived through ages on the tongues of men. Like those of the great Spanish and French aphoristic writers, Gracian La Rochefoucauld or Chamfort, the aphorisms of Dak Mahapurusa have gone deep into man's imagination, for, they serve the needs of peasant society as compass of daily life. Though generally breezy and devoid of much poetic quality, these aphorisms are genuinely original in content and utilitarian in purpose. In short, they bear a close parallel to the ancient Hebrew wisdom literature, of course, without the latter's poetic quality. Some of the aphorisms, particularly those relating to marriage and womanhood, appear to be paraphrases of *Manu-smṛiti*.

One very significant thing about the aphorisms of Dak Mahapurusa is that their language generally appears to be of the later Vaishnava era. Recent researches have revealed that from the point of language and the society they depict, these aphorisms, howsoever mystery-shrouded the authorship might be, cannot safely be assigned to the 6th century A.D., as supposed by some scholars. The existence of words like *darji*, *haram*, *chuburi*, etc. of Arabic and Persian origin justifies the conclusion that the sayings of Dak Mahapurusa cannot be as old as to be of the 6th century A.D. The Muslim contact in Assam cannot be relegated

to a period earlier than that of the eleventh century. On the other hand, the contrary of it can be established if we take into account the fact that these aphorisms are co-extensive and extend over a much wider region than the present geographical frontiers of the Assamese language and literature.

(ii) *Buddhistic Songs:*

In this connection, a word must be said about Buddhism. There are ample evidences from the isolated images of Buddha so far discovered in the land as also from the existence of sects, offshoots of the declining phases of Buddhism, to establish that once this religion of the "Enlightened One", in whatever form, must have held its sway in Assam. In this connection, K. L. Barua can be quoted: "It is difficult to believe that Pragjyotisha (Assam) which was so close to Uttar Kosala and Magadha could remain away from Buddhistic influences." Tibetan records reveal instances of pilgrims visiting the centres of Buddhistic religion and culture in Tibet. It is said that the temple of Hayagriva at Hajo (modern Kamrup) had been originally a Buddhist temple; the temple-deity was known as Mahamuni.

It is believed that Buddha is one of the ten *avatars* (incarnations) of the Hindu god Vishnu. This perhaps accounts for the dual role of the temple at Hajo; even to this day it is a place of pilgrimage not only of the Hindus but also of the followers of Buddhism. The Bhutanese of the neighbouring hills who are Buddhist by religion still visit this temple on pilgrimage. In regard to ritualistic impact, it will be revealing to quote K. R. Medhi who sums up the kindred points of Buddhism and Assamese Vaishnavism thus: "The monastic and congregational systems, the three precious objects (*saranas*), the image processions, the *pada sila*, the *asan* and relics, the offerings of lamps, oil and flowers etc. point to some similarity between Buddhism and Assam Vaishnavism." Because of many identical features common to both, Buddhism readily yielded place to Vaishnavism; there are communities in Assam who prior to their conversion into Vaishnavism are believed to be Buddhists. This is deduced on the analogy of a group of

communities in Bengal, as pointed out by Prof. Humayun Kabir in his *Adhunik Bangla Kavya*.

The songs known as *Bauddha dohas* are the compositions of popular preachers of the Buddhistic religion; the opinions of scholars about their date of composition differ considerably. While Dr. S. K. Sen puts the date at 14th century, Dr. P. C. Bagchi surmises that these esoteric poems must have been composed during the 8th to 10th century; this view appears to be nearer the truth. Their linguistic peculiarities justify such a conclusion. It is said that Sahajayana doctrines and Sahajiya practices constitute the essence of these esoteric compositions. Sahajiya, a mysterious form of Buddhism, is an "affirmative creed" that accepted life as it is and yet tried to transcend it by a self-imposed mental and physical discipline. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji is of the view that the language of these poems is a form of old Bengali which "in its basis" was "greatly influenced by Sauraseni Apabhramsa and occasionally by Sanskrit and literary Prakrit". Dr. B. Kakati on the other hand has pointed out that certain morphological and phonological peculiarities of the *dohas* have come down in an "unbroken continuity" from early to modern Assamese, which in a way proves the untenability of Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji's contention.

Basing his conclusions on a Tibetan manuscript, Dr. G. Tucci connects Minanath, a poet of the *dohas*, with Kamarupa; he belonged to the fisherman community. The following is an extract of a song composed by Minanath of Kamarupa taken from Pandit H. P. Sastri's *Bauddha Gan O Doha*.

*Kahati guru paramarthara bata,
Karma kuranga samadhika patta,
Kamala bikasila kahai na jamare,
Famala madhu pibi dhoke na bhomora.*

From a careful study of these compositions, it appears that the *dohas* fit into the prevailing spirit of the age. Though they appear to be written in a mixed dialect of Kamarupi and Maithili and are mainly didactic in purpose, these poems have a significant

literary value in the evolution of old Assamese poetry. The aphorisms of Dak Mahapurusa are often identical in spirit to the *dohas*; the difference that lies between the two is that while the one is essentially secular, the other is ostensibly religious.

The Buddhistic *dohas*, *tantras* and *mantras* etc. evidently belong to a dark age; they are valuable repositories of thoughts and ideals of a people before they emerged from the dark age of religious beliefs and literature to a more rational culture. These anonymous compositions of *tantras* and *mantras*, spells and charms, are generally archaic in language. They possess neither the lyrical spontaneity of the people's songs nor the easy expression of the *vachanawalis*. *Tantras* and *mantras* belong to a dark age when a corrupt religion stimulated either by the decadent phases of Buddhism or a crude form of Saktism was the prevalent faith. Yet, in between the 7th and the 12th century, it was an age of rockcult and copper-plate literature for Assam.

The 13th century and onwards reveals the growth of a rich literature which, as it appears from its highly subtle and expressive technique and vocabulary, must have been preceded by an exceptionally fecund language in the earlier years. The existence of such a language alone can justify the unprecedented literary growth of the subsequent generations. The aphorisms of Dak Mahapurusa exhibit a fecund language which speaks of such a possibility.

pre-vaishnava literature

STRICTLY SPEAKING, it is with Hema Saraswati who according to Sir E. A. Gait lived and wrote in the 13th century that Assamese literature came to exist in its written form. From his autobiographical sketch in *Prahlada Carita*, it is evident that he won the patronage of king Durlabhnarayana of Kamatapura in whose court preceptors and leaders of thought and poets of great artistic acumen gathered. Thus Hema Saraswati started his career in the pre-Vaishnava period with *Prahlada Carita* which in fact opened an era of recorded history in Assamese literature.

Competent authorities believe that king Durlabhnarayana must have ruled in Kamatamandala during the closing years of the 13th century or during the beginning of the 14th. Whatever that maybe, that Hema Saraswati was an illustrious contemporary of this king, there is little or no doubt. Not only the date, but also the frontiers of Durlabhnarayana's kingdom Kamatamandala have not so far been finally established. K. R. Medhi is of the opinion that this ancient kingdom must have embraced the modern districts of Rangpur and Cooch Behar, now in West Bengal, and Goalpara and Kamrup in modern Assam. This corroborates the theory that the ancient kingdoms of Kamatapura and Kamarupa were culturally co-extensive. Pargiter, an authority on the *Puranas*, is of the opinion that this kingdom

(ancient Kamarupa) stretched as far as to the Karatoya river on the west and also included a portion of the modern district of Rangpur in West Bengal. The *Vishnupurana* supports this view. This shows how futile it is to seek to isolate Hema Saraswati from the purview of Assamese literature.

The story of *Prahlada Carita*, as the name suggests, is limited to the differing mental attitudes between the demon king Hiranyakasipu and his Vishnuite son Prahlada. Though this work is acclaimed by K. R. Medhi as the "first Assamese book on Vaishnavism", the evidences to this end are more apparent than real. Although it is often claimed that this poem shows certain Vishnuite inclination on the part of its author and it helps to denigrate the Vamanaya cult, it is not safe to conclude that Hema Saraswati was an ardent Vishnuite. Judging from *Hara-Gauri Samvada*, a poem on which Hema Saraswati's claim to poetic recognition lies more firmly, it can be said that the poet's spiritual affiliations cannot be clearly defined. On the other hand, this poem shows the poet's predilections for Sakta-Shaiva worship. Hema Saraswati employed a type of rhymed couplet for his literary composition. He also made an extensive use of the *dulari* metre which attained its highwater mark of excellence in the hands of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva of the subsequent period. There are archaisms in *Prahlada Carita* that speak of the preponderating influence of Prakrit prevailing during the time. That Hema Saraswati is a master of vivid narrative, howsoever stilted his style might be, cannot be doubted. To be precise, his style very often than not inclines towards pomposity of an inferior order; it is sweeping rather than subtle and varied.

Harivar Vipra who translated the *Asvamedha parva* of the Mahabharata and other poets of the generation like Kaviratna Saraswati and Madhavkandali may rightly be regarded as the precursors of the Vaishnava literary dawn that followed subsequently. Like Hema Saraswati, Harivar Vipra also belonged to king Durlabh narayana's times as evident from his benedictory verses to this monarch. His *Vabruvahanar yuddha* is a poem of war and adventure, of local colour and tender emotions, that is woven round the

mythological theme of Arjuna's encounter with his own son, born of Chitrangada of Manipur. The dialogue of valour, mostly couched in homely references, enlivens not only the epic processes of the *kavya*, but also intensifies its dramatic incidents and situation. The appeal of scenes like Arjuna calling himself a "tiger" and his contestant a mere "goat" in the tiger's grip, and Vabruvahana twitting at Arjuna and belittling the latter's bravery displayed against the Kauravas (*Kapasa katiya sasa diwaya lawara*) is intensely popular. The fighting scene is described with gusto and the *elan* and ethos displayed throughout show the poet at his exuberant best. The pangs of Chitrangada at the slaughter of her husband in battlefield breathes of an aroma of devotion and rare fidelity. She condemns her son Vabruvahana as "far worse than Parasurama" who is guilty of matricide.

The *Kavya* presents a contrast between youth and age, pride and prejudice, passion and war, and above all, between Arjuna's past achievements and heroism in battle and present predicament in the hands of his own son; this lyrical re-appraisal is one of the best parts of the poem. In contrast to these scenes of failure and futility are presented scenes of music and great festivity when Arjuna is revived to life, and the two combatants, father and son, are united into understanding and filial affection once again.

Lava-Kusar yuddha is another noted work of Harivar Vipra; it is the story of Rama and his two sons in exile and the fight that ensued between the father and his sons. The emphasis is less on the episodes like the abduction of Sita by Ravana or her ordeal of fire and more on the events that followed as a sequel to these events. The author shows his poetic qualities at their best when he describes Rama's crisis of conscience on the one hand and the compelling force of an ideal on the other. And this the poet does by making Rama heir to all the passions and emotions inherent in the very nature of mortal beings. Though Rama's loyalty to an ideal ultimately proved stronger than his own personal emotions, the latter however proved stronger when he started weeping desperately like a child over Sita's banishment to forest.

The poet portrays with skill and craftsmanship the forest

scene with different varieties of trees, atleast seventy, laden with fruits and flowers. But the total impression that this description produces is that, if reduced into a canvas with paint-pot and brush, the forest would no longer be a forest bathed in a light that "never was on sea or land", but a mere conglomeration of trees, a grand poetic disarray. Nevertheless, in his aesthetics of nature he only conformed to the prevailing traditions of classical poetry, and in this, as in other avenues of his art, Harivar Vipra shows no doubt a "strong flavour of original genius".

Kaviratna Saraswati is the author of *Jayadratha vadha* which can be described as an adaptation rather than a translation in absolute terms of the Mahabharata story. In point of creative art and skill, this poet is not on a par with Madhavkandali or Harivar Vipra. Rudrakandali who has a distinct place in the Vaishnava literary sub-period translated into Assamese the *Drona parva* of the Mahabharata. His *Satyakipravesa* contains an eulogy of king Tamradhvaja and his brother in the ideal setting of mythopoetic relationship existing between Rama and Lakshmana. The similes and imageries he uses are simple which constitutes a redeeming landmark of his language. The great bulk of Assamese poetry that preceded the Vaishnava era consists of episodes from the Epics such as the *Asvamedha parva*, *Jayadratha vadha* etc. Madhavkandali rendered the Ramayana into Assamese ("*pade virachita rama-katha*") under the orders of king Mahamanikya of Tripura.

In the pre-Vaishnava period, covering about two solid centuries, Hema Saraswati and Madhavkandali are the names that stand as prominent landmarks. The latter has displayed wonderful music and varied diction in his version of the Ramayana; this has captured the imagination of the later generation, not excepting that of Sankardeva's. Like Chaucer paying his tribute to "Moral Gower" in *Troilus and Cressida*, Sankardeva in the *Uttarkanda* of Ramayana, produced jointly with Madhavdeva, pays a warm tribute to this fore-runner ("*purvakavi apramadi*") of Vaishnava poetry, Madhavkandali. Like Chaucer's debt to "Moral Gower", Sankardeva's debt to this "unrivalled one" is obvious in the use

of metre and diction. The age to which they belonged was sceptical, but under the auspices of poets like Madhavkandali and Hema Saraswati, the new literary renaissance was already ushered in.

Though imbued with a certain poetic spirit, the style of Hema Saraswati has a ruggedness in marked contrast to the exquisite polish of his contemporary, Madhavkandali. But this must be noted that the latter's suavity of language is often obscured as in the poem *Devajit*. Though the burden of this poem is supremacy of ethical values acquired through *nama-dharma* in the true Vaishnava spirit, *Devajit* is devoid of the manifest poetic qualities of Madhavkandali. Barring Pandit H. C. Goswami, most of the scholars are of the opinion that "it is very much doubtful if this (*Devajit*) was his (Madhavkandali's) composition". This poem is an epic of war that describes Arjuna's encounter with Indra for the latter's reluctance to invite Krishna to rajasuya yajna performed by him. In the encounter, Indra was defeated by Arjuna under Krishna's inspiration.

The translation of the seven-canto Ramayana, *Ramayana supayara*, not only popularised mythological themes and legends, but also acquainted the age with religious inspiration of the Vaishnava type. Madhavkandali allowed the magic of his imagination to play into the framework of the original Ramayana and with his intense poetic gifts transmuted what was a translation into a great work of art and craftsmanship. The following is an image rich in its own beauty.

*Vayubege larayu Sitara bastrakhan,
Meghata lagila jena ravira kiran.*

Sita's raiment quivers in the breeze,
Like clouds drenched with sunbeams.

Madhavkandali was an adept in the art of translation; the following is an instance of how he has rendered into Assamese a well-known *sloka* from the Ramayana (*Lanka kanda*).

*Dese dese kalatrani dese dese ca bandhavah,
Tam tu desam na pasyami yatra Bharatasahodarah*

Assamese rendering :

*Bharyya putra bandhumyata pai yatha tatha,
Hena natu dekhoho sodara pai katha.*

To say in the words of Dr. M. Neog: "It is in the hands of Kandali that the rather artificial language with occasional betrayals of the colloquial, which was employed in the religious, biographical and even historical literature of Assam till the advent of British rule, was set and standardised. This is a language embellished with a music of its own, but with simple figures of speech like alliteration, simile, metaphor." Madhavkandali not only brought the Ramayana nearer home to the Assamese people and furnished the talented among them with materials for creative ventures, but also fostered a spirit of fusion and synthesis in literary history. Kandali's sense of humility is astounding: "*pakhi sava uraya jena pakha onusari*", "birds fly according to the strength of their wings", and therefore he does not claim any special merit for himself.

Pre-Vaishnava poetry is characterised by three metres: *pada*, *chabi* and *dulari*. One thing must be noted here: except that they borrowed freely from the Epics, these pre-Vaishnava poets are neither the forerunners nor the conscious initiators of any religious ideology; to them goes the credit of extending the frontiers of literary materials and initiating a literary tendency. They did not initiate any school of religio-ethical thought whatsoever. Except offering a vast reservoir of materials for literary creation, the Epics themselves are not an instrument of Vaishnava or any such religious ideology.

The literary stronghold of the Vaishnava period was principally in western Assam as forces stimulating the growth of literature found a congenial soil there. The renaissance of Assamese life and literature was in fact possible under king Naranarayana (1533-1584) who ruled in Cooch Behar. Till then and even covering a part of his reigning time, Assam was the home of many creeds and faiths, offshoots associated with Saktism and decadent Buddhism. That was the time when witchcraft was exalted into

worship, superstition into virtue and ignorance into a positive creed. As pointed out already, pre-Vaishnava literature was not a conscious attempt at a socio-religious revolution; it was, it won't be wrong to say, a literature for the sake of story.

SAKTISM CRYSTALLISED into a distinct faith under the inspiration of *Tantra* literature in which various prayers and incantations are prescribed in the form of a dialogue generally between Shiva and Parvati. In the course of time, the moral principle associated with Saktism degenerated into vulgarity and tried to maintain itself by means of cynicism, credulity and cowardly conduct. Apart from the degraded form of Saktism, Buddhism also degraded into a cult of ignorance and superstition and ultimately coalesced with the *Tantric* aspect of Hinduism in certain phases. This state of things continued until Vaishnavism was ushered in to shed a new light in the horizon of religion. The *Tantric* faith was not without its literary supporters like Durgabar and Mankar who composed two different versions of *Padmapurana* in support of its rites and rituals. This faith inculcates the principle of devotion to female deities like Padmavati and Manasa, guardian deities of snakes. It was in a sense an age of social and spiritual cross-purposes.

In the prevailing atmosphere, Sankardeva, the founder of Assamese Vaishnavism found all this. With great care and endeavour, he set himself to spread the Vaishnava faith among the people and rationalise man's religious attitude. This must be said that Vaishnavism acted like a cleansing storm and the

result of it was a renaissance of conscience. Thus in the context of conflict between blind faith and bigotry of the most inflexible type on the one hand and rationalism and liberal thought propounded by Sankardeva on the other, Vaishnavism opened a new chapter of religious renaissance and literary progress.

The Vaishnava faith initiated by Sankardeva is known as *ekasarana dharma*, i.e., devotion to one God. The cardinal features of it are (i) *sravana kirtana dharma*; the principle of audition was accepted as a stimulating device for religious devotion, and (ii) the *dasya* view of life was propounded in the manner Kabir and Tulsidasa did, according to which the relation of man to God was like that of a servant to his sovereign. It was not like that of a woman to her beloved as postulated by Mirabai or Suradasa. This is why the character of Radha and the "faery power of unreflecting love" are absent as themes from the general purview of Assamese Vaishnavism; it is marked by a certain measure of austere attitudes. (iii) It is democratic in thought and all-embracing in concept and application in the sense that it did not accept any division of caste or creed. (iv) Literature, its accredited channel of expression, was meant to stimulate interest among the general mass of people, women and illiterates particularly.

Vaishnava religion was an open revolt against the cold intellectualism of Brahmanic philosophy on the one hand and the misguided faith of the Tantricians on the other. And thus, through literature not only was theology made vivid, but also a faith in a loving, personal God for the people was made possible of realisation. To quote Tagore: "When the mystic has achieved the theophanic state, all aspects of the universe are equal, sacramental declarations of the ultimate reality." That all created beings are equal and they reflect the light of the Creator is what Vaishnavism propounds and practises.

Sankardeva (1449-1569) and Madhavdeva (1489-1596), the two best-known saint-poets of Assam, belong to the later medieval period. Sankardeva was a great religious reformer and a finished poet too. By one of those happy accidents of fate which produces genius like jewels from rocks, he was the central focus of

a renaissance that produced a comprehensive impact on different avenues of art, culture and literature. He held the magic mirror to a people torn by religious animosities with a crusader's zeal and soon with delightful surprise, they came to recognise themselves; they could trace the lineaments not only of the face, but also of the soul. Thus, a process from the realm of blind instinct to self-conscious knowledge was already in momentum.

That Sankardeva was a renowned Sanskrit scholar is evident from his *Bhakti Ratnakara*, a treatise on Vaishnavism in Sanskrit and other Sanskrit verses incorporated in his *ankiya natas*. He is the first great poet in order of time of the Assamese people and in order of merit, he is amongst the first of all Assamese poets. The age of Vaishnava culture is essentially an age of unrest and enthusiasm. The most insistent feature of the period, as all over northern India, was an impatient progressive spirit, alien to the medieval mind. With a view to propagate his religious tenets and doctrines, Sankardeva began towards the close of the century he was born in to compose literary works, poems and dramas with essences culled from the *shastras*. Sankardeva possessed the essential qualities of a translator; the translation of the *Bhagavatam*, described as "*vedantara ito paramatatva*" (co-ordinated essence of Vedanta) was the starting point of unprecedented enthusiasm and inspiration for Assamese literature. There is a foretaste of Sankardeva's genius in his trite poem *Harischandra upakhyana* which, it is said, was composed when the poet was in his teens. This was his prologue in a sense to future achievements and further blossoming of talents.

The poetical work that has given Sankardeva great fame and recognition is undoubtedly the *Kirtana* that contains twenty-six poems running into 2261 couplets. Except two, *Sahasranama vrittanta* and *Ghunuca*, compositions of Anantakandali and Sridhar Kandali respectively, incorporated in the collection on the authors' explicit desire, the *Kirtana* is an anthology of Sankardeva's own poems. This book of verse is a rich store-house of spiritual ideas and thoughts gathered from sources like the *Vedanta*, *Srimat Bhagavatam*, *Gita*, *Padmapurana* etc. Noble in style, imagination

and ideas, the influence of the *Kirtana* in enriching our language and literature and philosophic thoughts cannot be over-emphasised. It must be remembered that Sankardeva is something more than a popular writer and a poet of musical verse and spiritual exaltation. He is and has been a great force.

Sankardeva is dynamic and yet a supreme artist; he is noted for his clear and chiselled phrasing: with his colossal learning of Sanskrit, he is in the best tradition of Indian poetry; besides, his depth of ideas and sweep of language and feelings justify this conclusion. "Whoever touches this, touches a man", said Walt Whitman about his *Leaves of Grass*; this may be said of Sankardeva's *Kirtana* as of all great works of art and genius.

In *Ajamila upakhyana*, it is seen how even absent-minded absorption in God works as a catharsis and purifies the soul. Though episodic, *Prahlada carita* and *Gajendra upakhyana* are imbued with an inspiring spiritual purpose. *Bhakti Pradipa* contains succinctly the quintessence of Vaishnava philosophy.

*Eka citte tumi moka matra kara seva,
Parihara durate yateka ana deva.*

Devote thyself to me with an undivided mind,
And keep away other gods at a distance.

Gunamala, composed on the behest of king Naranarayana of Cooch Behar, is a book of hymns in praise of Vishnu and Krishna; its jingling rhymes and onomatopoetic words are of absorbing interest; each stanza is like an algebraic formula that sticks to the tip of the tongue easily. Sankardeva's art is generally didactic; it is an affirmation of the principle according to which the pure spirit of religion, apart from external dogmas, is really the precious thing of life.

Sankardeva set out on a pilgrimage to different Vaishnava cultural centres of northern India in 1483 and came back in 1495; he devoted these years to strenuous cultural and intellectual activities. The post-pilgrimage stage in Sankardeva's life is a period of great magic and for sheer beauty of deep "philosophical truths", the poems produced during this period are unrivalled. The inspiration was deduced mainly from the *Bhagavatam*, the

unrivalled merit of which consists in "the best possible synthesis of the highest spiritual effort of individual with the most practical social co-operation". Sankardeva who was himself a family man, however, did not practice or encourage *vairagya* in any way, for, he knew that those who refuse to face life and seek refuge in the abandonment of the world do really suffer the final defeat of the spirit. This repugnance to *vairagya* accounts for the fusion of the poet and the preacher in the man.

In the strict sense of the term, Sankardeva was a religious mystic who also happened to be a great artist. Monseur Taine holds that a man can best be judged by considering his works with reference to his epoch and environment. We cannot arrive at an adequate comprehension of Sankardeva's literary compositions without being aware of certain facts in the life of the man: (i) the fact of his sojourn to the centres of Vaishnava culture in northern India, (ii) his profound knowledge of Sanskrit and Indian philosophical literature, and (iii) the spirit of blind faith that constituted the psychology of the times.

Besides *Kirtana* and *Dasama* which constitute the quintessence of Sankardeva's genius and *Sisulila* and *Adi Dasama* that contain captivating portraits of Krishna's childhood, the poetic excellences of his compositions are also revealed in his *Bargitas* and *Ankargitas*. These songs, according to K. R. Medhi, "may well be compared with the songs of Vidyapati and the rhythm of Joydev". Devotional songs like the *Bargitas* express that ecstatic love of the Vaishnava which is realised through intensity of feeling and expression of the infinite. From this standpoint, the *Bargitas* can often be compared with the "noble numbers" of Herrick, as Dr. B. Kakati has done. In this connection, this must be remembered that songs are defined according to their musical characteristics and not according to the perimeter of ideas or thought-content. *Bargitas* have a distinct musical scheme apart from the deep philosophical thought inspiring them. Despite their highly spiritual and intellectual content, the language of the *Bargitas* is placid and graceful. They are transcendental like the first medieval hymns of the Christians.

O my Lord, prostrate at Thy feet, I lay myself down,
 And with a contrite heart beseech Thee to save my soul,
 My soul is in the point of perishing through the poison
 Of the venomous serpent of worldly things,
 On this earth all is transitory and uncertain,
 On what shall I place reliance?

(Translated by Dr. B. Kakati)

Lyrical and introspective, Sankardeva may truly be described as one who laid the foundation of mysticism in our literature with his *Bargitas* and *Ankargitas*. Liberty and not bondage is the true nature of the human soul; the phenomenal world is illusory and unreal like a mirage or dream. *Bhakti* itself is the gift of a righteous life. Meditation on the transitoriness of the world and incertitude of life are the favourite themes of Sankardeva as of other Vaishnava poets. The best expression of the Divine Personality is through the human personality and through the life process of man there is a continual communion between the human and the divine. The Vaishnava realised this human personality and the Divine personality both of which remained combined in the nature of man in terms of "I" and "Thou". This mystic relation is evident in the *Bargitas* as also in the metaphysical poems like *Anadi-patana*, *Nimi-nayasidha-samvada* and the *Uttara kanda Ramayana*. Rama is an image of Krishna; in one of the *bhatimas*, Rama is addressed thus :

Thou art the lord of three worlds,
 and the guiding principle of the Universe;
 Thou art the undefined attributes,
 and thou art the supreme power;
 Thou art the supreme philosophy
 beyond the attributes.

Even a cursory glance into his *natakas* and *kavyas* will convince one of Sankardeva's brilliant originality, his craftsmanship, his high sense of morality. A wider survey leaves us with the conclusion that this Vaishnava saint-poet was also a master of individual and very beautiful constructions and melodies; his pearls are as

plentiful in the *Bargitas* as elsewhere. This must be noted that the greatest artists are dynamic as well as decorative; they display elemental power and yet they preserve beauty of form. Sankardeva's art unites strength with great beauty, serenity of expression with depth of spiritual understanding; a master of technique, an artist in metrical harmonies, a rational idealist with a definite philosophy, this saint-poet possesses also the lure of that narrative genius which has brought fame and popularity to poets from Homer to Dante, from Chaucer to Spencer and Milton.

Sankardeva possessed the creative imagination of a playwright and knew well the art of telling a story so that its pathos, beauty and romance are heightened by the music of composition; his *Rukminiharana kavya*, the inspiration of which is drawn from *Bhagavatam* and *Harivamsam*, is a long narrative poem written with insight and sympathy; in it, the mythopoetic scenes are tinged with touches of local colour and life that is particularly manifest in the original view taken of the nuptial scene. There is intense emotionalism in the *kavya*, and yet, the somewhat sumptuous description natural to the romantic episode is never allowed to preponderate over the thrilling interest with which the story is charged.

Sankardeva's religion which is aptly reflected in his literature is marked by a happy blend of wide catholicity, a sense of broad humanity and wide democratic sentiment. *Bhakti* tried to abolish the rigid caste rules; it came to be commonly held that anybody who worshipped God belonged to God, no matter what caste or creed he belonged to. Amongst Sankardeva's disciples we find, for instance, people belonging to different social status and creed *viz.* Bhutanese, Brahmins, Muslims, Ahoms, Untouchables and the like. In *bhakti*, Sankardeva found, to use Aristotle's words, "all he needed".

Drama, poetry, religion,—all engaged Sankardeva's astounding intellectual activity, in addition to which he carried on an enormous social work of far-flung import. The Vaishnava monastery system that holds a key position in Assamese social life even today is pre-eminently his creation. Besides this, the operas called

bhagwanas are his contribution to the art-history of the land. Through these popular operas on Pauranik themes, Sankardeva introduced not only a happy combination of education and entertainment, but also the technique of stage-setting with painted scenes. He was himself a painter who knew the art of using the brush with imagination; he painted scenes of *Vaikuntha*, Vaishnava paradise, on big canvases for the theatre: *Chinhajatra*, a drama now lost, is said to be a procession of scenes. Sankardeva's dramas are interspersed mostly with beautiful songs, some of which in point of dignity of thought and musicalness remind one of the *Bargitas*, "divine melodious truth, philosophic numbers smooth".

Sankardeva is a nature-poet also in a limited sense. Like a decorative painter on stained glass, he decorates his poetical compositions with objects from nature; nature was a decorative symbol for him and he used it particularly as a background against which mythological characters were generally depicted as experiencing the "coarser pleasures" of life. In *Haramohan*, for instance, Sankardeva weaves a vast tapestry, an ornamental decoration of artistic beauty at once rich and magnificent. Suffused with the colour and fragrance of flowers like Tulsidasa's picture of Chitrakuta in *Gitavali*, *Trikuta varnan* presents descriptive portraits of nature, barren but bright as a "dome of many coloured vase". The same thing can be said of *Rasa krida* where *kurubaka*, *asoka*, *campa*, *ama*, *jama*, *bela* etc. (all trees) and creepers like *juti*, *jati*, *malati* etc. are adequately portrayed to lend panorama to the story. Although his objects of nature are bathed in fresh, pensive, flowerlike beauty, Sankardeva was not primarily concerned with the creation of nature-poetry for its own sake. What he essentially believed in was the didactic power of literary art, and nothing beyond.

In conclusion, it won't be an exaggeration to say that Sankardeva's genius appears the sea itself with its immensity and limits, its rhythm and repose, the constant self-balancing of its ebb and flow. In *Haramohan*, it is the grandeur of natural description that compensates for a certain obscenity in the narrative part of the

story; yet, it is a poem with a purpose. Sankardeva is first a religious reformer and then a literary artist. In his hands, to all purposes, deism was vanquished and the rational tenet of Vaishnavism established on a surer foundation.

To Sankardeva must also go the credit of making a composite language a thing compact and vital; like Milton wearing a mixed garment of Latin and puritanic theology, Sankardeva wore one of Sanskrit and Vaishnava theology draped in a rejuvenated Assamese language. Despite the interpolation of Brajabuli and *tatsama* words, the style of his *Bargitas* is simple. Likewise in his dramas, there is a large admixture of Brajabuli idioms, particularly so far as the songs are concerned. In fact, like Chaucer in English literature, it is Sankardeva who has infused spirit and life into the Assamese language and laid it on a solid foundation.

As a versifier, like Marlowe refashioning Latin verse for his dramas, it is Sankardeva who re-fashioned the old verse-forms and gave them a new polish and dignity. In fact, he was the first to employ metres like *dulari*, *lechari* etc. as medium of expression for religious, mystic and theosophic thought, the rhythm of verse beating in unison with the rhythm of spiritual thought.

Madhavdeva (1489-1596) had perfected what his *gurudev*,—"jaya guru Sankara, sarva-gunakara", had left unfinished. There is a graceful flow in Madhavdeva's style which is as expressive and captivating as that of his master, Sankardeva; there are occasions when the younger poet appears to be more philosophic and intellectual in ethical approach than the elder one. Essentially comparable with the former in point of genius and acutely austere as a devotee, Madhavdeva possessed an apostolic tolerance of spirit. He was a robust optimist who preached faith and proclaimed *bhakti* regardless of failure or accomplishment in the right Bhagavata way.

Madhavdeva's poetry came to him as naturally as leaves to a tree in spring. *Namghosa*, *Rajasuya Yajna*, *Adikanda Ramayana*, *Bhakti Ratnavali*, *Janma rahasya*, *Nam-malika* etc. are some of his noted poetical works. Deeply metaphysical and intellectual, redolent with the "dim and fugitive traits of consciousness",

Bhakti Ratnavali is in a sense the Bible of Assamese Vaishnavism, a book that sharpened the edge of *ekasarana dharma* which means devotion to one God who is the "supreme power". In *Rajasuya Yajna*, the supremacy of Krishna is portrayed through the delineation of his domestic and social life. Though a translation from the Ramayana, the *Adikanda* breathes a certain measure of freedom that bequeaths to it the character of an original work; the verse is graceful and vibrant. *Namghosa*, the philosophic basis of which is Vedanta, is great poetry imbued with high religious philosophy that contains in the manner of Sankardeva's *Kirtana* the core and essence of Assamese Vaishnavism. It must be said that if Madhavdeva's *Bargitas* are exquisite poetically, his *Namghosa* is exquisite philosophically.

In *Namghosa*, Madhavdeva developed a unique skill in the form of musically sombre verse, an art in which he had many imitators but no rival; never has the individuality of a poet-preacher so completely permeated his work. It is inconceivable that any other man could have written a single stanza of the *Namghosa*; the music in it deepens and organises as the rhythm undulates. Not only from the point of poetic qualities, but also that of philosophical study of spiritual ideas, the *Namghosa* stands supreme. Madhavdeva was a great borrower; the opening lines of *Namghosa* are in fact a rendering from a Sanskrit source, compositions of one Vishnupuri Sannyasin; but, what he borrows he transmutes into new beauty and sombre dignity.

It must also be said, that Madhavdeva was a deep-voiced musician who sang his own compositions with great felicity. As he sang his *Bargitas*, he invariably swayed his audience with the enchantment of his voice like a tempest swaying the reeds.

Be careful brother,
Till life pass away :
The Providence of Govinda
Soon will grant you grace.
Trifling is life, trifling youth,
All is illusory; have no care;

Sorrows, throw them off
 And fasten the mind at Hari's feet.
 Desires, cast them off. Break the trap of illusion,
 Saith Madhava, pin thy hope to the feet of the Lord.
 (Translated by Dr. B. Kakati)

Touched with the exquisite poetic gifts of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, the *Bargitas* have attained a distinctive depth of spiritual passion and resignation. They constitute the principal corpus of devotional songs and poems in Assamese literature.

Like Sankardeva, Madhavdeva also took to the propagation of Vaishnava tenets and doctrines not only through musical transmissions of the type of *Bargitas*, but also through visual representation of mythological incidents like *bhawana* performance. His dramas like *Cordhara* and *Pimpara gucuwa*, portraying the child-life of Krishna, are characterised by childlike suavity. Under Madhavdeva's auspices, the eternal fascination of the child, joy and warmth, fond maternal caresses etc. constitute a distinctive feature of Assamese Vaishnavism. Vrajadham is the mythopoetic land of Krishna's *lila*; among the grown-ups are the milkmaids and Yasodadevi, the eternal Madonna. The atmosphere is conceived as an arcadia overflowing with the grace of childhood simplicity. Krishna with his symbolic flute is conceived not as an amorous youth, a happy melodist "forever piping songs forever new", but a child with flute and trinklets "dancing", as it were, "upon the silver edge of darkness", to use Percy McKaye's words.

In his conception of Krishna as "eternal child", Madhavdeva is almost alone in the whole range of Assamese Vaishnava literature. The poet mystifies the existence of Krishna as a child playing through space and time, and thus, the literary purpose to "open the mind to beautiful thoughts", to use J. M. Barrie's words, is constantly brought into an illuminating focus. Like Suradasa drawing his inspiration for Krishna's child-life from the Sanskrit *Bhagavata Purana*, Madhavdeva also drew his inspiration from the same source. The aspect of Krishna living and playing among the cowherds and milkmaids of Vrindavana was

emphasised by Madhavdeva with a passion for "intensity and intimacy" in order to bring Krishna's universality into relief. "After Shankaracharya, his followers emphasised the personal existence of a supreme deity, possessing every gracious attribute, full of love and pity for the sinful beings who adore him, and granting the released soul of a home of eternal bliss near him." (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). This aspect of the God-head constitutes the soul of Indian Vaishnava poetry. Madhavdeva's depiction of Krishna's child-life as in *Bargitas* and *Ankiya natas* is a reflection of this broad tendency. It must be said that in child-psychology, Madhavdeva began where Sankardeva left.

Madhavdeva's genius is introspective, reminiscent and analytical; rhythmic climax and great intensity of feeling constitute the keynote of his poetical genius. It is supposed by some that when the transcendental ideas of Vaishnavism prevailed, the enjoyment of earthly life was regarded with disfavour; these ideals found a ready response in the people and soon got crystallised into a cult. Transcendancy meant to them the hope of a noble and pure life, a hope that was more anxiously nursed because existing conditions, as history reveals, seemed to prompt men to despair. The constant raids on the plains by the savages from the Bhutan Hills, perpetual absence of peace and order in the realm, the capriciousness of ruling personalities etc. greatly contributed to social unrest and insecurity. In this tangled chaos of life, the ideal of *bhakti* appeared to be the only "metaphysical villa", to use Aldous Huxley's words, which afforded transcendental peace and security. This is an apt instance of *zeitgeist* moulding the literary and religious history of a people.

On account of these conditions, it is however not to be supposed that there was a real dearth of royal patronage for literature. King Naranarayana's (1533-1584) court was like a university where men of learning gathered, among whom the most well-known are: Sankardeva, Rama Saraswati and Anantakandali. To say in the words of K. L. Barua: "Eminent scholars and poets were invited to his (Naranarayana's) court to translate the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Mahabharata* into Assamese and also to

compose treatises on varied subjects, such as grammar, poetics and astronomy." (*Early History of Kamarupa*). Under the all-comprehensive patronage of Naranarayana, as under Akbar or Alfred, not only religion and poetry grew, but grew as well the studies of grammar, syntax and mathematics. Purusottam Vidyavagish compiled a grammar and Bakul Kayastha wrote a mathematical treatise in Assamese. The renaissance of conscience thus ushered in under the auspices of Vaishnava culture expressed itself in different streams and got manifested in different avenues of growth. It was under royal patronage that Rama Saraswati occupied himself with the monumental task of rendering the Sanskrit Mahabharata into Assamese. The poet was asked by king Naranarayana to "make verse rendering of the Mahabharata, the seven books of the Ramayana and the eighteen Puranas for popular edification". (*Darang-rajavamsavali*).

In depth of insight and masterly creation of character as also in beauty and power of language, Rama Saraswati, though youthful in years, stands equally eminent among the supreme figures of Assamese Vaishnava literature. With the translation of the Mahabharata—the central theme of which is not so much the encounter of the Kauravas and the Pandavas or the conflict between virtues and vices so much but in the best tradition of Vaishnava literature the projection of Krishna's personality,—the corpus of Assamese poetical literature got enriched. There are episodes in Rama Saraswati's *Mahabharata* that have no primary connection with the original, episodes like *Kulacala vadha*, *Baghasura vadha*, not to speak of *upakhyanas* like that of Nala and Damayanti that are woven in deftly, thus giving a splendid harmony and unity to the whole. Episodes like these inspired poets to compose separate verse narratives; the miraculous career of Bhima for instance stalking through the epic, an elemental force, inspired the poet's imagination so much that he had devoted a whole narrative to Bhima's feats, called *Bhimacarita*. Witty, vivacious and gay, the narrative is essentially Assamese in quality. Bhima's career as a servant in Shiva's household, his gluttony and the master's poverty,—these are incidents that easily vibrate the chords of response in the poet's rural audience.

Though the poet differs widely and variously, but never incoherently from the source, Rama Saraswati's Mahabharata like Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is an original work. He had improved and dilated upon the original, more especially in the *Bana parva* where the glorification of Vishnu is heightened with a passion. It would be wrong to say that Rama Saraswati confined himself entirely to the Epics and the Puranas. His literary works like *Manicandra*, *Sindhuyatra* and *Asvakarna* breathe of the aroma of the soil. An adept not only in poetry and religious philosophy, but also in the arts of music, poetics and erotics, Rama Saraswati widened his gaze far and wide; he had rendered Joyadeva's *Gita Govinda* into Assamese for the first time. One thing must be said in conclusion: the poet's preoccupation with war scenes in his *kavyas* has a conventional ring of the type of Madhavakandali's. Whatever this maybe, that Rama Saraswati has given strength and beauty to our neo-Vaishnava movement, there can be little or no doubt.

Anantakandali is another noteworthy member of the Vaishnava orchestra who with his mythopoetic legends and episodes in verse has added new colour and rhythm to it, his poetry is distinguished by purity of thought and classical elegance of diction. It contains many descriptive passages of noble beauty and, even should the mythological intricacies at times seem to be abstruse, we cannot, however, close our mind to the poet's artistic and absorbing eloquence. Anantakandali's *Sahasranama vrittanta*, not to speak of *Dasam Bhagavata*, shows scholarship and poetic skill. On the other hand, it won't be out of place to say that his *Ramayana*, despite the fact that it occasionally displays the flashing brilliance of the Sanskrit original, appears to be a dim reflection of Madhavakandali's *Ramayana*. What Anantakandali has discarded is the latter's art of exaggerated delineation that was occasionally resorted to to sustain and feed popular taste. Whatever the above maybe, Anantakandali's *Ramayana* is distilled spiritual essence; it is he who for the first time established a basic identification of Rama with Krishna, an inspiring landmark in Vaishnava literature and religion.

Notwithstanding his profound knowledge of Sanskrit, Anantakandali wrote in Assamese and claimed for it recognition as medium of literary expression. This is what he said :

I am an adept in Sanskrit verses,
and can compose them well;
Yet, I write in this medium,
so that women and the illiterate
might get the joy of listening.

To restore treasures of Sanskrit literature from its "sibylline leaves" and to present them in a popular garb to the people is the central idea behind all compositions of the Vaishnava era. It is like Tulsidasa defending the use of the vernacular in his *Ramacarita manasa* in reply to the Sanskrit pundits who advocated the use of Sanskrit for all literary work. Tulsidasa likened his work to an earthen vessel filled with ambrosia and compared the flowery medium of his Sanskrit-writing contemporaries to jewelled cups filled with poison. It must be remembered that nowhere is Anantakandali's genius displayed more completely as in the idyllic blend of realism, war and romance that is reflected in his *Kumara-harana*; it is an idyll. Compared to Rama Saraswati's, Anantakandali's art is precise in essence.

Conclusion

The king-pin round which literature of the Vaishnava era pivoted was the great *Bhakti* movement,—“the most beautiful stage”, as the Gita says, “in the life of devotion”. Vaishnava poet-preachers taught that a life of mere external ritualism without the spirit that is to animate and inspire the outer life is a fraud, *mithyachara*, as described by Lord Krishna. Vaishnava literary men reveal at their best how it was possible to distil into lucid and meaningful expression the idealistic and philosophical tenets of the new faith. In a land where religious instincts preponderate over other attitudes of life, spiritual literature of the Vaishnavas naturally found universal response and appeal.

To be brief, the Vaishnava age symbolises a renaissance not

only of religious faith, but also of literature and culture. From its literature it is evident that the great Epics served as the reservoir of materials for literary treatment. With respect to literary accomplishments, it should be said that the Vaishnava poets perfected their language to a standard capable of expressing succinctly different shades of thought and feeling, including the highly philosophical ones. It could be tender and moving if the poet was describing death or parting. It could be lucid and easy, if he was describing child-life or tranquillity of nature. It could be rugged, majestic and sullen in the passages concerned with bloodshed, battle or calamity. To use Romaine Patterson's words, the "current of change flowing beneath the surface" of Vaishnava literature was effected through fluidity in place of rigidity, freedom in place of restraint.

As the religious furor got itself exhausted, a decline in the great Vaishnava period steadily set in. Poets like Sridhar Kandali who followed this "grand line" of poets tried to enliven the dying embers of Vaishnava literary traditions. This age of decadence naturally was an age of few inconsequential neo-Vaishnavites. To be precise, Anantakandali shares with Rama Saraswati the sunset glories of the great Vaishnavas.

The age that succeeded was an age marked by a political change ushered in by the hegemony of the Ahoms. The Ahoms popularised a system of chronicle literature called *Buranjis*, written both in prose and verse. Thus, from the beginning of the 17th century, it became an age principally of chronicle and recorded history. The change was significant, for, it was a change mostly from verse to prose; it is true that it was not an exclusive growth of one at the expense of the other: it was concomitant. To be precise, there had been an uninterrupted stream of literary progress stretching beyond the period of Sankardeva which like every elemental happening has shown high tide and low tide, but has never completely ceased to flow.

Another noteworthy feature is that till the end of the Vaishnava era, the centre of literary activity was in western Assam that was under the hegemony of kings either of Kamatapura, Cooch

Behar or Kamarupa, thus signifying a single political unity. With the decline of these kingdoms and the consolidation of the Ahom political power in eastern Assam, the centre of literary and intellectual activity shifted from the west to the east. The Ahoms who were "certainly more receptive to new ideas and were in temperament more adaptive", as Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji has pointed out, got merged in the indigenous population and through their successive rulers built up and established steadily a tradition of literary work and aesthetic progress of a more matter-of-fact and utilitarian type.

kavyas and bargitas

THE POETS of the classical age, the age that synchronises broadly with the period of Vaishnava literature, are great story-tellers and the stories are invariably in verse. Form and style were of chief interest to these poets; at times it appeared as though the manner of saying a thing was of greater importance than the thing itself. Rama Saraswati with his translation of the Mahabharata set a literary standard of taste and thus the poets accumulated a wealth of storial matter, legends and myths, from the Epics and the Classics. It must be said in this connection that our poets like Harivar Vipra and Hema Saraswati of the pre-Vaishnava period were intimate with the repositories of Sanskrit culture in the original even prior to Rama Saraswati's *Mahabharata*.

Vaishnava *kavyas* can be classified into two broad categories according to subject-matter: (i) *vadha kavyas*: these poems deal, roughly speaking, with the slaughter of demons and monsters, and (ii) *parinaya kavyas*: these poems are on the subject generally of elopement and marriage. Though distinctive in subject-matter, the undertone of these narrative poems is the same i.e. the glorification of Vaishnava values. *Vadha kavyas* are about the *daityas* and *danavas* of antiquity like Jaghasura, Kulacala and Asvakarna. Because of their inherent narrative power and elemental interest, these *kavyas* generally serve as appropriate source

of recreation and pleasure to people in their respite from toilsome hours.

The peasants listening to these verse romances of engrossing interest and stimulating imagination came inevitably under their spell. In a way they fed the flame not only of knowledge, but also that of moral attitudes through lessons aimed at showing the justice of God in the person of His incarnate on earth, Krishna and the ultimate triumph of virtues justifying "the ways of God to man". Mainly heroic, the *vadha kavyas* in their story-interest can be compared with the Anglo-Saxon epics and plays like *Beowulf* and *The Fight at Finnsburgh*. The Vaishnava romance-writers possessed an eye for popular needs and sentiments and this is why they blended humour with heroism. Like ancient Greek and Scandinavian tales of adventure with gorgons and demogorgons in hills, dales or swampy places, the *vadha kavyas* too deal with super-normal themes of exploits and enterprise; the distinction between the two lies in the fact that while the former are for their own sake, the latter are purposefully imbued with a religious *motif*.

In Vaishnava literature, this world of human existence is conceived as a huge forest and the desires and attachments of life, a fastening snare. In it the soul of man is ensnared like an enslaved deer.

The world is a dense forest,
spread with the fetters of illusion,
and like a deer I ramble in it.
The snares of attachments have caught me,
While like a hunter, Destiny pursues me.
(Sankardeva)

In the spirit of the Gita, Sankardeva realised that the world is full of illusions, mysteries and fallacies. Man is a poor player who struts and frets and then is heard no more; the rest is silence. The divine lustre of the "flame immortal" is the only ennobling mentor in life's voyage; it is Divine will that guides and moulds both creation and destruction. And it is *Bhakti* through which

comes the release from mortal miseries and sufferings. The exile and subsequent wanderings of the Pandavas in dense forest and their frequent encounters with terrible forms like *daityas* and *danavas* are symbolical of man's brief sojourn on earth, surrounded by malign forces of existence.

The conception of good and evil eternally at war is the core of all literature with a moral purpose. Satan in Christian literature at war with the benign forces of heaven is the product of such an idea; the *daityas* and *danavas* are no different. The *vadha kavyas* are mostly symbolic; Baghasura for instance symbolises the vice of avarice. Bhima on the other hand is the saviour of people, a hero of unsurpassed might; he is endowed with super-normal powers to combat the forces of evil personified in *daityas* and *danavas*. To be brief, the expansion of spiritual ideas constitutes the central theme of the Vaishnava *kavyas*. The wanderings of Pandavas in exile yielded a wide avenue to poets to compose different stories of popular interest. For instance, Rama Saraswati's *Mahishdanava vadha*, *Khatasura vadha*, *Asvakarna vadha*, *Kulacala vadha* etc. are the results of such an opportunity. The heroic exploits of Pandavas, devoted disciples of Krishna whom Vishnu's light protected even in the face of worst misfortune, kindled popular imagination with "awe and wonder" and inspired it with spiritual reverence. There are spiritual lessons in these *kavyas*. In *Kulacala vadha*, it is said thus: as a mother does not take note of "the child in the womb striking her with his feet", so God does not take note of man's occasional transgression, provided he remembers Him at the ultimate moment.

Rama Saraswati's *Hema Sundari* is one of the best poems of its kind; it has a strange unequalled power both of description and vision redolent with insight into characters: with all its terrors, there is also a quantum of fine feelings in the suggestion of heroism and romance. Though it has a certain severity of design and solemnity, there is no trace in it of morbid sentimentality or theatrical effect. From the beginning, the poem is filled with dramatic suspense and the religious tone of it is saturated with a mystery motive. The fight with Asvakarna whom Bhima and

Arjuna finally killed in the subterranean world with mysterious weapons furnished by Vishnu for the destruction of the demon, the restoration of Hema Sundari and her ultimate union with Arjuna, all this is described in a significant manner. It is a subject similar to the *Knight Errant* of Millais of a damsel rescued by a wandering knight, a theme so common in medieval romance. The poem is discreet in treatment; the legendary crudeness of the poem, if any, is transmuted into fine appraisal of the Pandava brothers' nobility of attitude and selfless devotion to others.

Baghasura vadha is another popular *kavya* by Rama Saraswati. The story: it was enjoined upon the Pandava brothers by Agasthamuni to destroy a terrible demon Baghasura by name. He was a menace to everybody, sages and saints in particular. In the encounter, the Pandava brothers, except Yudhishthira, were slaughtered; the demon was fortified with a boon given to him by Shiva and Chandi, the source of his strength. Ultimately the demon was killed in battle and the dead Pandava brothers were revived to life with the help of a magic necklace that Draupadi was gifted with. In the ultimate analysis, the poem in the true Vaishnava spirit represents victory over Shiva and Chandi.

Kulacala vadha is likewise the story of a demon king whose tyranny over sages and saints knew no bounds. Here also the Pandava brothers, except Yudhishthira, were killed; they were ultimately revived to life by Krishna. Then an encounter followed between Krishna and Kulacala where the latter was killed by the former with the help of a *dhupa*-stand, as ordained by the saints. Killed by Krishna, Kulacala straightway became an inmate of *vaikuntha*, and all those who were reduced to rocks by the curse of the sages regained life as Krishna touched them with his feet. In Rama Saraswati's *Janghasura vadha*, the poem is enlivened with scenes of subtle humour as also those of tragic passions. The principal idea conveyed through these *kavyas* is the idea of man's conquest of forces that are frequently typified by demons and other supernatural beings, *i.e.*, forces of temptation and self, of pride and physical prowess. The path to spiritual purification lies through the thorns of tribulation.

The *harana kavyas* narrate romantic tales in keeping with the medieval atmosphere of elopement and ultimate union; in spite of abundant storial details, the central Vaishnava ideal of spiritual exaltation is never lost sight of. Anantakandali, the noted writer of *Sahasranama* and *Ghunuca*, is the author of *Kumara-harana*. With its jewel-lights and sensuous appeal, *Kumara-harana* may be said to have the exotic beauty and technical perfection of *St. Agnes' Eve*. Aniruddha, the lover flies from Dwaraka at the invitation of the artist-maiden Chitralekha, friend of Usha, to meet his forlorn bride in Sonitpura. The chief characteristics of the poem are romance and certain element of humour, pathos and the triumphant glory of youth. It narrates with grace and felicity the romantic restlessness of the youthful souls as also the ferocious encounter between the forces of Dwaraka and those of Sonitpura that ensued as a result of the secret amorous affairs of Usha and Aniruddha. At last, through the machination of Narada, the great "playboy" of the mythological world, Krishna appeared in the scene of battle; his benign influence cast away all discordance and finally succeeded in uniting the lovers in happy wedlock. Apparently an episode of romantic youthful passion, it is a jewel of a piece.

Anantakandali possesses the capacity to blend realism and fatalism, war and romance into fine proportions. In *Kumara-harana*, the poet has transfigured an old legend found in the *Harivamsam* and *Bhagavatam* into a romantic extravaganza. Its simple pathos, insight into character and faithfulness to truth, these transparent qualities have made the poem a popular favourite with several generations of readers. Told with great dramatic power and psychological understanding, the *kavya*, despite the fact that at places it exhibits a tendency to over-description and an inclination to dwell on extra details, is a moving study. Vaishnava ideals are brought out on a fulsome scale towards the end; yet the touch of mystery added to it in order to give due significance to the story, is kept within aesthetic limits.

Rama Saraswati was a devoted disciple of Sankardeva whom he regarded as *apuni Iswara*, "himself a deity". Besides other

works, he has to his credit two noteworthy *kavyas*: *Vyadha carita* and *Bhima carita*. The latter, *Bhima carita*, as already pointed out, is a mock-heroic narrative, an intense rambling burlesque in which the author's amazing humour is poised amidst widest extravagance. Despite certain blemishes, the poem will be read for its brilliant plot and rollicking humour; nowhere else as in *Bhima carita* the astonishing power over language, amazing wit etc. of the creator of the Assamese version of the Mahabharata show itself to such an advantage. Mythological tales of heroism are not generally depressing in effect, although they are didactic in the main and strain after realism. To be brief, into the medieval form of quest and adventure, these poets have introduced religio-ethical effects in a most skilful way.

Of the old *kavyas*, this must be said that the plots are admirably constructed and arranged in a skilful climax. The didactic purpose is all too tangible and yet it is literature of supreme beauty and superb art in its totality. Vaishnava writers of repute, almost without exception, had made the didactic purpose of their literature to undergo a "sea-change" into something rich and strange. The people of the time, to use Pandit H. P. Sastri's words, "found aesthetic, moral and spiritual food in the personality of Krishna and received the spiritual upliftment and ecstasy which made them forget the horrors of their environment and in some cases brought real and abiding peace to their hearts". Even Sankardeva's *Haramohan*, grossly sensuous and demoniac in passion, was written with a definite purpose.

Those with their minds
snared in gross sensuality,
let their hearts get sanctified
hearing this.

(*Sankardeva*)

The devotional mysticism of Vaishnavism vitalised Assamese dance compositions and these dances on their part gave rise to a distinct class of poetical compositions. The dance of the *sutradhara*

in dramas is such a composition and even a non-Vaishnava dance like the *Ojapali* could not escape its imperceptible influence. In brief, Vaishnavism made its mystic influence felt in all the avenues of Assamese life and literature.

One notable feature of Assamese Vaishnava poetry is the absence of romantic love in its limited sense, although this must be noted that there are *Bargitas* of Sankardeva to show that separation from Krishna is an agonising ordeal for the *gopis* i.e. milkmaids. This is explained as love on a higher spiritual level, not a bell to "toll" the *gopis* back to their physical self but to spiritual realisation. Assamese Vaishnava thought is marked by a certain austerity of conduct and expression. The absence of romantic passion, a characteristic which distinguishes it from the rest of Indian Vaishnava literature particularly of Chandidasa and Vidyapati, constitutes at once the strength and weakness of Assamese Vaishnava poetry. Though they enact episodes of love and romance, the *harana* or *parinaya kavyas* do not directly come under the purview of love poetry as commonly understood; love in medieval romances, to use Aldous Huxley's words, generally symbolised passion for "demoniac possession". The secret amorous exchanges between Usha and Aniruddha are an instance in point. Yet then, it must be said that free from gross sensual love, as portrayed in some earlier poems, Sankardeva and Madhavdeva diverted literary interests to the mystic love of God and sublimated passion and emotions by making man spiritually conscious of a higher impulse. According to the Vaishnavas, Krishna is a split personality, a man with a normal human existence and a god without attributes (*nirguna*) seen through the spiritualised gaze of the devotee; this is evident from Madhavdeva's *Bargitas*.

(ii) *Bargitas* :

Poetry, music and religion all combined, *Bargitas* or Vaishnava spiritual lyrics constitute a distinct form of musical compositions; in them, poetry and religion melt into music and all combined flow ultimately into the multitudinous sea of the all Beautiful. They raise us to a level of experience where art and religion

mingle for a unique spiritual transport. Alone and exposed to the adversity of life, the soul desires salvation and the mind gets weary seeking peace. The world is an illusion and in this desert of life, the only ray of hope is divine bliss, enkindled through prayer and absorption in the thought of God; the human soul weeps in agony, deep and penetrating. Mortal existence with its mundane fetters wears out the soul; the soul seeks bliss elsewhere and this supreme bliss finds fulfilment in the focus of divine light. The easiest way of attainment as also fulfilment of divine purpose on earth has been revealed by Krishna in the Gita thus :

O Arjuna ! concentrate your mind, be my devotee,
Be my worshipper, bow down to me, I promise,
You will obtain Me, dear as you are.

This message of the Gita is the message of the *Bargitas* and what is laid down as essential in both is the absolute and unconditional surrender of self to God. This sentiment is aptly enshrined in the following words of Sankardeva: *pave pari hari karaho katari, prana rakhabi mora*, "prostrate at Thy feet, O God, I beseech Thee, save my soul".

As in the case of *Ankargitas*, the language of *Bargitas* of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, songs that are deeply spiritualistic in appeal and inspiration, is different from that used in their regular *kavyas*. This language is known as Brajabuli, *i.e.*, the language of Vrindavana, the mythopoetic land of Krishna's spiritual activities. In the literal sense Brajabuli means "language of the gods"; thus it acquires a sort of sacredness and sanctified spirituality in the mind of the people. This language preponderates in vowels and alliterative juxtapositions. Scholars have described this language of the *Bargitas* as "mixed Maithili-Assamese language". This must be said that under the auspices of different Vaishnava saint-poets, Maithili underwent variations according to different regional linguistic characteristics. During the period of Vaishnava literary expansion, for instance, a characteristic form of Maithili without being divorced from its roots developed in Bengal; similarly in Assam also it developed into an indigenous

Maithili form which might roughly be described as “Kamarupi Maithili”.

Each *Bargita* is composed according to a *raga* of classical Indian music; it is set to tune accordingly and sung in the *prasangas*, *i.e.*, prayer time. Because of the deep philosophical tone in them, Dr. B. Kakati, as already pointed out, compares them to the “noble numbers” of Herrick. “Noble numbers” they are nodoubt, but it must be borne in mind that the classification of songs is seldom done on the basis of the philosophy they contain. What constitutes the life-spirit of a song is its music, the *ragas* as propounded. These spiritual songs are *Bargitas* because they yield to a deeper and more complicated musical choreography (*marga-sangita*) than that of the usual type of people’s songs. From the *ragas* affixed to the songs, it is difficult to say if an indigenous system of music flourished in Assam or it was a modified extension of the prevailing Indian form. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji is specific about it: “The usual *ragas* or musical modes and *talas* or time-beats, such as we find, *e.g.*, in Maithili and Bengali lyrics, are also common to the Assamese devotional and other lyrics (*Bargitas*). This would indicate that a common system of music was current in the whole of Eastern India including Assam, and this music was the classical Hindu Music of India.”

In most of Sankardeva’s *Bargitas*, inherently austere, Krishna and spiritualised absorption in him constitute the main *motif*. Different imageries of a classical quality bring this distilled picture into a sombre focus. In one of his *Bargitas* (*raga: kedara*), Sankardeva sings of the futility of life’s possessions,—*athira dhana jana*; in this world of conflicting interests and emotions, Krishna is the only saviour. Another *Bargita* (*raga: asuwari*) is a war-poem in a sense that describes the movement of an army; every word of it strikes like a drumbeat and the rhythm of the poem is modulated into an unprecedented vigour. Yet, this poem too concludes in a note of resignation to Raghupati. Vishnu is worshipped in his two incarnations of Krishna and Rama. It is said that Sankardeva wrote 240 *Bargitas*, most of which are said to be lost accidentally in a forest fire.

Well-versed in music, Madhavdeva not only gave wings to *Bargitas*, but also widened their canvas and attuned them to different moods and moments of Krishna's manifold life. Like Sankardeva's, their scope was not limited to a single passion, the passion of single-minded devotion and resignation to God. Madhavdeva's *Jaganar Gitas*, tender and delicate as the emotions of a child, are in the nature of cradle-songs in beauty of child-life and maternal love. In fact, his absorption in the divine light of childhood as reflected in Krishna's life widens the frontiers of spiritual absorption. Krishna shares the joys and sorrows of his cowherd companions; with a crown of peacock feathers on his head, he dances in the company of these "Vraja chawalas" (children of Vrajadham). The music of his flute draws the cows nearer him. The following picture of Krishna in Madhavdeva's *Bargita* (*raga: lalita*) is tender like a hymn.

*Yasomati pakhite nayana jurai. Jagajana jivana
bhakata parama dhana, hasi hasi carana ghasai.*

The childhood pictures of Krishna as unfolded in some of Madhavdeva's *Bargitas vis-a-vis* the picture of maternal tenderness are as fresh and inspiring as morning dew. This is how Krishna complains to his mother.

*Phirilo bane bane dhenu bicari,
trine katala sava sarira hamari.*

In the process of tending the cows in the forest, Krishna's body was bruised by the sharp edges of grass; hearing this, his mother's eyes get moistened with tears. This *Bargita* is in *raga basanta*.

The other type of *Bargitas* that Madhavdeva wrote are songs of separation; thus the perspective is changed. In one set of songs, Krishna lives a tangible life in the form of a child and in another he is missed, but lives all the same in the agonised heart of spiritual attachment. These songs are like the calm repose of a sea under twilight glimmer. To the saint-poet, God is the abode of compassion: *dayar Thakur Yadumani*.

Like Shakespeare's aesthetics dwindling in the hands of Dryden, the art of *Bargitas* steadily declined in the hands of subsequent composers; except those in the hands of Ramacharāna Thakura, Gopaladeva and a few others, it became a pale imitation in the hands of these backlights of talents. In some of the songs of the post-Sankara era, Brajabuli was discarded for Assamese; even this could not give the new Vaishnava lyric artistic polish and spiritual beauty. Radha first made her appearance, a mature woman given to the devotion of God, in Madhavdeva's compositions, but how the theme came to be degenerated into an orgy of sex during this period of morbid decline can be judged from what Madhavdasa, a minor poet of this period, wrote about the "rights mysterious of connubial love" enjoyed by Krishna with Radha, and the "gods looked on". In fact, Madhavdeva is the last of our great musicians : with him, the *Bargita* died. Under the inspiration of Kabir who wrote a class of verses called *Cautisa*, Sankardeva also wrote his *Cathiha* verses; these are inconsequential compositions.

In conclusion it might be said that not the least sensuous but fervid and divine, the *Bargitas* are essentially hymn-lyrics that represent the ideal of salvation through mystic union with the Divine; musical in expression, they are transcendental in inspiration.

non-vaishnava literature

BESIDES POPULAR songs, ballads and Vaishnava poetry, there flourished, primarily under the patronage of Kocha Kings, a school of poets essentially non-Vaishnava in ideas and inspiration. The Kochas were a powerful dynasty of rulers who gave law and learning to the people for a substantial number of years. Under their eminent ruler Viswa Singha (1496-1533), the Kochas extended their political sway far and wide and made themselves the ruler of Kamatapura in the 15th century. Under the patronage of this ruler, Durgavara, a non-Vaishnava poet, composed his songs of the *Ojapali* dance and other songs pertaining to the legendary episode of Beula. That this poet belonged to Viswa Singha's times is evident from his work *Manasa* and *Padmapurana* where he makes pointed references to king Viswa Singha, the "lord of Kamata". His most well-known poem *Giti-Ramayana* is of course silent about the poet's personal identity. Although he gave coherence and harmony to the non-Vaishnava class of songs and from the point of verbal texture and technique, Durgavara's poems possess the qualities of classical poetry, it might be said that this poet was not much in the cultural spring-tide of the age. His poetic diction is in the most part archaic; broadly speaking, it does not possess the lucidity of the Vaishnava poets' language.

*Beulai bole bharasa karis bukat,
Kenthera bhark dekhon tor sarirat.*

Yet, there is no doubt that Durgavara who lived and wrote at a time when Vaishnava poetry attained its meridian splendour is among the most well-known of the non-Vaishnava poets. He composed a cycle of Beula poems and a number of popular songs, the inspiration of which was derived from the legends of Ramayana and *Padmapurana* in the main; though essentially based on Sanskrit treatises, these songs are beyond the pale of Vaishnava influence. For lyrical sweep and graceful rhythm, Durgavara's *mayo bone yao svami he* is almost unrivalled in the whole range of old Assamese poetry.

Though the initial inspiration is from Sanskrit, Durgavara does not seem to be well-versed in that classical language; his compositions like *Giti-Ramayana* tend to incline towards being popular rather than towards being scholarly. *Giti-Ramayana* was written with an eye to the needs of the *Ojapali* dances to which it is spiritually attuned. For this, according to scholars, the poet depended more on Madhavkandali's *Ramayana* than on the original Sanskrit. The emphasis being mainly on the songs, the story naturally suffers from a lack of coherence. There are no deviations of a very significant nature, except in the *aranya-kanda* where the poet takes maximum freedom from Madhavkandali's *Ramayana*. But, despite these deviations, the central purpose which actuated Durgavara to compose the *Giti-Ramayana* is not lost sight of.

Giti-Ramayana is vibrant with local colour. The description of *Caitra-caturdasi* festival performed by Rama and Sita in Ajodhya is itself a picture, at once colourful and sensuous in appeal. One particular aspect of Durgavara's genius that naturally strikes the reader is his economy of words and details; to be more precise, his art was suggestive and evocative rather than profuse and proli-ferous; his best lyrics in the *kavya* establish this fact : there are fifty-eight songs in the *Giti-Ramayana*. To the poet, Sita is *citrara putali* (a pictorial image). Durgavara's description of war-scenes is limited in scope; what he excelled in as a poet was his capacity to deal with

the lyricism of the basic emotions of the human heart. Wherever there are pathos to describe, Durgavara shows himself at his best. Sita's fidelity was tested by an ordeal of fire after she was recovered from Ravana; this is an event of great emotional possibilities.

In a few significant words put in the mouth of Sita, he brings out an entire range of pathos and derision.

*Itara narira sama dekhila,
Natara natuni yena anyajane dila.*

You have treated me like a base woman,
And wanted to dispose me off to others,
Like a dancer disposing off his dancing mate.

While gross sensuous reference was a taboo in Vaishnava poetry, particularly of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, except when it yielded to spiritual possibilities as in *Haramohan*, Durgavara suffered from no such mental discipline or inhibition. Sita's absence due to banishment revives memories in Rama's mind, memories of amorous dalliance with her, intensified by nature's panorama of humming bees and odorous flowers along a lake called Champa. This must be noted that Madhavkandali's *Ramayana* also contains snapshots of such sensuous associations.

Although he refers in the *Giti-Ramayana* to Rama on more occasions than one, Durgavara was by creed a Shiva-Shakti worshipper. Untrammelled by religious influences of any kind, he displays a high sense of aesthetics so far as poetic qualities, thought and imagination are concerned. Durgavara's description, for instance, of the Ganga, classical in tone and imagery, possesses a distinctive beauty; it is one of the rare descriptions of a flowing stream in the whole range of old Assamese poetry.

Narayandeva who flourished as a court-poet under the patronage of the king of Darrang, Dharmanarayana, in the early 17th century, is a member of Durgavara's school of non-Vaishnava poetry; his songs are known popularly as *Sukananni*, a malapropistic formation of the words "Sukavi" and "Narayani": they constitute an item of *Ojapali* dances. Narayandeva's *Padmapurana* is an artificial

epic describing the sorrows and sufferings of Beula in the course of her wanderings. Beula's passage to heaven as drawn by this poet reaches the height of lyrical achievement; there is a pictorial quality in this description. From the invocation to Sri Chaitanyadeva (1485-1533), a noted Vaishnava reformer of Bengal, in *Padmapurana*, it can be gathered that Narayandeva's date is either contemporaneous to or later than that of Chaitanyadeva's. The latter conjecture appears to be correct because of the poet's association with King Dharmanarayana.

In this connection this must be noted that another poet, a compatriot of Durgavara, who refused to be swept into the Vaishnava cultural trends of the time is Mankara. Though for the lack of authentic evidence it is difficult to fix Mankara, a great votary of the serpent-goddess Manasa, into a particular historical period, scholars are of the opinion that he must have belonged to Kocha king Vishwa Singha's time; this is deduced from what the poet says in his benedictory verses: *Kamata raja bando raja Jalpeswara*. It is evident from this that the king of Kamata and king Jalpeswara is the same person who is no other than king Viswa Singha. According to Dr. M. Neog, there is a striking similarity between Mankara's salutations to "a hundred queens and eighteen princes" and Durgavara's reference to Viswa Singha's "forty-eight queens and eighteen princes".

Though a poet of inferior abilities, Mankara sought to vindicate the dying vestiges of the tantric era in his *Manasa kavya*. Although noted for rustic simplicity and ruggedness of thought, Mankara is a poet who is not generally recited by the *Ojapalis*. Though there are evidences of Vaishnava literary impact on Mankara, it must be said that he was absolutely free from Vaishnava religious affiliations; his poetic medium appears to be dialects prevalent in the modern districts of Kamrup and Goalpara during those times under the initial impact of Islam. To be fair to him, Mankara was a poet of the unlettered masses to whom he sang his own songs with great *elan* and avidity. The secret marriage of Hara and Gauri is an episode of great erotic possibilities to catch popular imagination at its riotous best and Mankara has made full use of it. To be

particular, the theme that the poet usually chooses is erotic in content and inspiration.

A word about serpent-worship of which Mankara was a literary high-priest : with the Meitheis of Manipur, Khasis, Hajongs and Rabhas of Assam and Mishmis of NEFA, serpent-worship was an accredited form of ritual to which a place of honour was accorded at subsequent dates by Lord Shiva's association with serpents. Like every other form of worship depending on rites and rituals, *mantras* and incantations, serpent-worship that drew its sustenance from a deity called Manasa had its rites and rituals, *mantras* and music.

In Assam, this deity Manasa has different manifestations : Visahari, Padmavati and Marai. It was a real leveller in the sense that all, irrespective of castes and creeds, participated in this worship, the principal item of which was *deodha* and *deodhani* dances. A man or a woman danced in these rituals as one possessed of super-mundane inspiration; singing of songs was another inspiring feature of these rites.

Usha-parinaya of Pitambar Dwija who was a contemporary of the Vaishnava saint-poet Sankardeva is beyond the influence of the latter's ideals. This cycle of poems on the theme of Usha's union with Aniruddha reveals a distinct departure from the Vaishnava conception of the same theme as portrayed by Anantakandali. It is to be noted however that the difference between the two classes of poetry, Vaishnava and non-Vaishnava, is one of mental attitude rather than of diction. While Vaishnava poetry is spiritual in diction and ideals, non-Vaishnava poetry is essentially sensuous, imbued with the passions and emotions of the earth.

Not to speak of Anantakandali's, Pitambar Dwija does not possess the dramatic insight of his illustrious non-Vaishnava compatriot Durgavara's even. It will not be out of place to note that *Usha-parinaya* in its poetic diction breathes of the inherent sensuous inspiration of *Bihugits*. A tendency to sustain vulgar tastes by sensuous allusions and exaggerated emphasis on details constitutes its basic difference with Anantakandali's *Kumara-harana*. Exaggeration is not art as zephyr is not spring. The difference between the

Vaishnava and the non-Vaishnava period in poetry will be evident if we compare, for instance, the *Giti-Ramayana* of Durgavara with the Vaishnava *Bargitas*. Yet, the physiological portraits depicted in Durgavara's poem are marked not only by an intensely bold originality, but these are deeply significant as well. Folk-sentiments imbued in an atmosphere of sensual love largely influenced the compositions of non-Vaishnava poets like Durgavara and Pitambar Dwija.

Pitambar Dwija's claim to recognition is not oriented by mass aspirations in the way that Durgavara's or Mankara's was. He possessed some of the artistic and intellectual qualities of Vaishnava poets. He was a Sanskrit scholar and it is this aspect of his genius that gave colour and rhythm to his poetic creations. Like Madhavdeva, he was not only a poet but a musician too.

Pitambar Dwija's chief patron was Prince Samarsingha of Cooch Behar at whose behest he composed his literary works. These are *Bhagavata Purana*, *Usha-parinaya*, *Markandeya Purana* and *Nala-Damayanti*. The last poem is an appraisal of sadness and sex, in the delineation of which the poet exhibits great craftsmanship. *Damayanti*, an agonised portrait, has been aptly described and equally deftly is given the description of *Damayanti's* romantic restlessness. Untrammelled by any religious dogma or discipline, Pitambar Dwija brought his imagination to emphasise and underline this aspect of things.

Pitambar Dwija's reference to his own self as an "infant poet" (*kavi sisumati*) is an instance of the traditional Vaishnava sense of humility guiding non-Vaishnava thinking. Vaishnava influence was spiritually so intense and comprehensive during this time that there could be no escape from it. Pitambar Dwija has described Rukmini's pining for Krishna thus :

*Bilapa karia kande mai Rukamini,
kona ange khuna dekhi naila Yadumani.*

On coming to know of this description, Sankardeva, an illustrious contemporary of Pitambar Dwija, made a critical reference to it as : *garva parvatata situ uthiya acaya*, "he is on the crest of vanity". In the

context of Pitambar Dwija's profound sense of humility as expressed by him in his literary works, this *obiter dictum* of Sankardeva is irrelevant; this must have been inspired by deeper psychological reasons rather than by any consideration of literary propriety, for, Sankardeva himself in delineating the physical charms of *dibya kanya* in his *Haramohan kavya* has used almost an identical expression : *eko ange nahi khati khuna*. The appeal of Pitambar Dwija's compositions is sensuous no doubt, but instances of a similar nature are not lacking in Vaishnava poetry even. This criticism of Sankardeva might have been inspired by the inherent sense of conflict between the two systems of thought, Vaishnava and non-Vaishnava. This must not be forgotten that Sankardeva had condemned Pitambar Dwija as "Sakta Kamasik".

Without any metaphysics to propound or propagate, the non-Vaishnava poets, unlike their Vaishnava compatriots, were not primarily didactic in inspiration. What the poet has done in *Usha-parinaya*, a theme initially based on *Harivamsam*, is to recast it into a new framework without however offending in any tangible way the details of the original; sex and erotic responses constitute the core of this poem—Usha is the key-figure of the story till it reaches the climax of war and strife between the two contending forces. Thus the lyricism of youthful emotions is ultimately submerged by the epic of arms and war. Though the poem is highstrung at times, its author is never oblivious of the compulsions of popular taste and aspirations.

Marked by a certain measure of freedom, Pitambar Dwija's *Bhagavata Purana*, composed during Viswa Singha's time, is more an adaptation than a literal translation from the original. The primary occupation of the poet was the way he narrated a story and all other considerations, religious or otherwise, were submerged under this single motive-force. In *Bhagavata Purana* he celebrates the "activities of Krishna", but in doing so he has not allowed his predilections to impinge upon the canvas of poetry; it is here where he differs from his Vaishnava contemporaries. That Pitambar Dwija was not affiliated to any religious school is further evident from his work *Markandeya Purana*; it is a story about goddess Chandi,

her encounter with demons and valour in battle. What is of absorbing interest is the art of story-telling that the poet possessed. Pitambar Dwija was a prolific writer and one of the most outstanding of non-Vaishnava poets of the age.

(ii) *Later-day Poetry :*

A considerable number of popular poems and ballads grew under the royal patronage of the Ahoms. King Rudra Singha (1696-1714) was a lover of poetry and a patron of art. He and his successor Siva Singha (1714-1736) were themselves poets of merit; their compositions embody the declining phases of Vaishnava poetry; but their sense of aesthetics is something that cannot be questioned. Kaviraj Chakravartty whose claim to recognition rests mainly on his translation of the *Gita-Govinda* from Sanskrit flourished as a poet of Rudra Singha's court; it was under his guidance that the Assamese version of the *Gita-Govinda* was copiously illustrated with sketches. Chakravartty has to his credit another narrative in verse, *Sakuntala*, the inspiration of which is also drawn from Sanskrit.

Rama Dwija's tale of romance *Mrigavati carita* is in verse; it is a typical faery poem that bears faint resemblance to a Hindi poem of the 16th century. With its tender beauty suffused in an atmosphere of faery grace, it is a departure in an age of set rules and literary diction. The hero of the poem is a prince, a departure into secularism; he is united ultimately in wedlock with a faery. The struggles and set-backs prior to their union are symbolic of life.

Kaviraj Misra is another poet of repute who flourished about 1616. His popular poem *Sial Gossain* is scintillating in composition all through. During the reign of Siva Singha, the religious theme for literature was once again dimly revived; it was through Ananta Acharjya's *Ananta Lohori*. The poem is in the Sakta tradition of religious belief and contains beautiful hymns to Durga together with penetrating descriptions of Shiva and his abode Kailasha.

The distinct note of departure from religious themes is sounded through historical literature under the auspices of the Ahoms. The Ahom *Buranjis* or chronicles stimulated interest in secular

subjects, a fact that helped to make literary style less distant and high-flown. This interest was ultimately channelled into different streams of literary compositions.

Verse tales from the *Hitopodesa* were freely adapted; side by side with it, compositions of other moral maxims and observations in rhymed couplets were undertaken. Dwija Goswami's *Kavyasastra* and Rama Misra's *Putala carita* like Kaviraj Misra's *Sial Gossain* and Rama Dwija's *Mrigavati carita* are distinct landmarks in the history of our secular literature. The dominant note of non-Vaishnava literature under the Ahoms is that it sought to preserve its distinctive feature by being secular in the sense that it was not affiliated to any religious dogma or ethical ideology. In conclusion this might be said that literature of this age passed out of the sombre groves of religion, philosophy and devotional music and confined itself to subjects of secular human interests as far as possible. The growth of *Buranjis*, historical literature under the Ahoms, gave to this tendency an imperceptible impetus and tradition.

vaishnava drama : general characteristics

VAISHNAVA DRAMA that witnessed a deep and extensive development under the auspices of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva is essentially a 16th century product; the two together laid the foundation of our theatre and dramatic literature. Besides giving entertainment, the purpose of Vaishnava drama was education of a religio-ethical type. Nothing serves this purpose better than visual representation for a people to whom the alphabet was an alien choreography. This dramatic art which was primarily, because of its religious *motif*, didactic, drew its inspiration to a great extent from classical Sanskrit drama. "The Sanskrit drama can be deemed a compendium of all the fine arts like poetry, music, dancing, painting and histrionics. Histrionics developed out of the art of gesticulation or *abhinaya*, stage-songs from music, dialogues from speech and scenic arrangements from the art of painting." (*Sanskrit Drama*: P. E. N.). Most of these aspects are found in the technique of Classical Assamese drama.

This must be said that though the initial inspiration came from Sanskrit, the architects of classical Assamese drama were not oblivious of local traditions like the *Ojapali* dances; the technique of these dances contains most of the primary requisites of the theatre, except characterisation and action in the dramatic sense; to be precise, the *Ojapali* dances served as the rockbottom on which the

infra-structure of Vaishnava drama was partially built. *Ojapal* is a choral dance, the agenda of which is enlivened with songs and dance dialogues; its main purpose was popular entertainment through an acknowledged form of *abhinaya*. It is true that its scope for character delineation is limited, yet, this must be said that certain dramatic potentialities are inherent in the very process of its aesthetic exposition. Under the auspices of *Sukananni* performance, a mute character, popularly known as *devadhani*, was introduced into the existing complex of *Ojapali* dances.

According to some scholars, the *devadhani* must have served as the precursor to the *sutradhara*, a key-character of Sankardeva's dramas; this seems improbable. What is probable is that the *Oja* (leader) of the *Ojapali* dances whose main function was not only to lead but also to give coherence to the dances by his vibrant interpolations must have served as a model. It is on this character that the *sutradhara*, initially borrowed from Sanskrit sources, must have been modelled. To be brief, what Sankardeva possibly did was to borrow the outline frame of his dramas from Sanskrit sources and fill it up with traditions of histrionic representation available in the existing reservoir of people's art. It is here that the *Ojapali* dances, a popular miniature play with songs, dialogues and body movements, must have given the stimulus for the production of art-theatre under Sankardeva's auspices.

The *sutradhara* or the "string holder" is himself an institution; unlike the *devadhani*, the *sutradhara* is dynamic all through. It is more so in Assamese Vaishnava drama. Faubion Bowers speaks of the *sutradhara* thus: "He lays the scene, describes background information, which characters in the plot cannot convey in action, speaks their thoughts aloud and interprets moods. He keeps the denser section of expository poetry as his own, leaving conversation to the actual performers." (*Theatre in the East*). Judging from the Assamese drama, the principal role of the *sutradhara* is one of exposition; the rest, introduction of characters, direction of the play, linking up the plot into a consolidated whole etc., are only concomi-

tants. There is a similar character, a side-singer, in the Japanese *kabuki* also.

The *sutradhara* of Assamese Vaishnava drama, unlike his Sanskrit counterpart, is present on the stage all through the performance. In fact, he is a link-character between the *dramatis personae* and the audience. He is an integral part of the theatre and is both an actor and stage-director. Like that of the Greek chorus, his function is to "enlighten and enliven". Naturally, he must be proficient in dance, music and the histrionic arts; he has to sing songs and *bhatimas* that constitute the prologue and the epilogue of drama, recite *slokas* and give directions in the play as also make up for the deficiencies of the plot by interpolations. The *ankargitas*, unlike songs in Sanskrit drama, are sung in chorus; the *sutradhara* usually participates with other musicians in the chorus. One thing must be said in this connection: situations even of intense impulse and dramatic complexity were not unfolded in action; instead, it was the *sutradhara* who filled up these gaps through verse narrations, a technique that relegated action and dialogues into the backwash of the dramatic stream.

Unlike the Sanskrit *nataka* which derives its name technically from *natana*, meaning "to enact", and is divided into ten Acts, the *ankiya nata* or Vaishnava drama is a one-Act play; devoid of Acts and scenes, it flows in a continuous stream. The question of maintaining the three Aristotelean unities did not arise, for, one dominant feature of this drama, because of its spiritualised mythopoetic atmosphere, was totality of inspiration. Without the all-comprehensive role of the *sutradhara*, these effects are not possible.

Although it reflects some of the essential characteristics of the Sanskrit *nataka*, the initial inspiration of the Assamese *ankiya nata* is the *anka* type of Sanskrit drama; the *nataka*, according to Sanskrit aestheticians, usually delineates themes of Puranic origin. Sentiments of popular appeal like heroism, love and other associations of a romantic nature are woven into the story to enrich its impact. On the authority of Ramacharan Thakura's *Carita puthi*, it can be said that the word *anka* was used to denote Assamese Vaishnava one-Act play. The Sanskrit *nataka* is a comprehensive type that

embraces a wider avenue of incidents and episodes, monads and moods, which the *anka* type does not. Sanskrit *anka* drama is limited to the expression of sentiments like women's wailings and verbal duels for battle. In the light of it, Sankardeva extended the scope of his *ankiya nata* and made it comprehensive like the Sanskrit *nataka* with the initial difference that while the latter usually embraced ten acts, at least not less than five, the Assamese *ankiya nata* comprised only one. In the way of Sanskrit drama, *purvaranga*, preliminaries to make the plot malleable, constituted an integral part of the Classical Assamese theatre. To make the performance meaningful and significant for the audience, these preliminaries, primarily a technical device, were unavoidable.

Ancient drama, all the world over, began in the precincts of religion; the origin of Assamese drama is no different. Indian drama is regarded as of divine origin; it is said that it was born in the court of Indra under the auspices of Brahma. Then, for the enjoyment of mortals it was transmitted to earth through sage Bharata whose *Natya sastra*, born of divine inspiration, is "roughly analogous to Aristotle's codification of Greek drama", as pointed out by Faubion Bowers. Any deviation from sage Bharata's tenets was considered with disfavour by the Sanskrit aestheticians.

Though not as pronounced as to become a sacrilege, Assamese Vaishnava drama made certain minor deviations. According to Bharata's *Natya sastra*, scenes depicting eating, adultery and death or conveying any such impressions were not aesthetically right. At least in the case of "eating" and "death", Assamese Classical drama marks an exception. Deviation was deliberately effected in order to offer entertainment to the people and in the process stimulate education on the Vishnu cult; nothing abstract appeals generally to popular imagination unless it is concretised. Sankardeva understood the fundamentals of common human psychology and attuned his art to its dictates accordingly. While on-the-stage depiction of battle is prohibited in Sanskrit drama, Sankardeva did the contrary in his dramas like *Rama vijaya*, *Parijata harana*, *Rukmini harana* etc. Simultaneously with it, killing is the pivotal point of dramas like *Kamsa vadha*, *Keli Gopala* etc.

Besides, amorous dalliance, a taboo in Sanskrit aesthetics, is represented with a gusto in some of Sankardeva's dramas.

As in Sanskrit drama, so in Assamese Vaishnava drama, the *nandi* recitation which is of a benedictory nature constitutes the real prologue of the drama; it was usually addressed to a deity, in the case of Assamese drama to Vishnu or his manifestations; in an indirect way, it constituted the *purvaranga* of a play. While in our drama the scope of benedictory verse was limited, in Sanskrit drama, the benedictory verses are addressed either to a deity or to a Brahmana or to a king. The benedictory verse, for instance, in Harsavardhana's (7th century A.D.) play *Naganandam* is addressed to Lord Buddha. There was no hard and fast rule; it depended on who the personal deity of the author was. In the case of our Vaishnava playwrights, Vishnu was their personal deity whom they sought to universalise through stage-representations, and accordingly the benedictory verses were addressed to him or his manifestations.

From the following remark, *nandyante sutradhara*, it is generally presumed that in Assamese drama, the *sutradhara* is ushered in after the *nandi* recitation. But, according to some scholars, it is the *sutradhara* who performs the dual function and *nandyante sutradhara* only means the shifting of the *modus operandi* of the play and not the persons assigned with the functions. The *nandi* strikes the key-note of the religious *motif* of the drama and the *sutradhara* whose verses follow the *nandi* verses throws light on the nature of the plot.

As in the Sanskrit drama, *amukha* (introduction) and *prastavana* (induction) are the two other integral parts of the Assamese theatre. Generally the *prarusana* (laudation) begins in this way: *bho bho savasada, svaeng srinota savadhanatah*. This is followed by *bhatima* songs, spiritualised music. Before any character of a divine nature is ushered in, the *sutradhara* in the *prastavana* says: *akase ki vadya bajata*, what instrument beats in the sky? Then, it was customary to provide some celestial sound,—*devandundubhi bajata*, the celestial drum sounds, whereupon it was added: *ah parama isvara Krishna milala milala*. Thus the main character like Krishna or Rama was introduced to the audience. With effects as such, not only the

scene for the presentation of characters was prepared but also the psychological impact of reverence and awe, a process through which perception was sublimated.

Although interspersed with Sanskrit *slokas* that add mystery and sombre dignity to the atmosphere, the principal language of classical Vaishnava drama is Brajabuli. By constant use as an art-medium and by literary patronage it enjoyed, Brajabuli came to be accepted as the recognised vehicle of Krishna cult in Assamese literature. Brajabuli is to Vaishnava drama what Sauraseni Prakrit is to Sanskrit drama; it furnished the prose medium. In the six dramas of Sankardeva, there are one hundred and eighty Sanskrit *slokas*. Except one in *Patni-Prasada* taken from the *Bhagavata Purana*, the poet himself composed all the *slokas*.

Brajabuli was not a current language of any particular region or section of the Indian people; it was a literary language to which regional linguistic traditions imparted their characteristic verve and beauty. In spite of certain variations, the preponderance of Maithili elements in the language is pronounced. Dr. S. K. Sen says: "This artificial language was given the name of Brajabuli because it reminded one of Vraja, the land sanctified by the presence of Radha and Krishna. The term of Brajabuli, however, should not be confused with the name of Brajabhakha or Brajabhasa. The latter is the name of the actual spoken language, a form of western Hindi of the district round about Mathura." About the use of Brajabuli by Sankardeva, K. R. Medhi offers a plausible argument: "We may accordingly conclude that Sankardeva used Brajabuli in his *Bargitas* because it was the common language of Krishna devotion and in his drama because it was supposed to have been the language of the place (Vraja) where Sauraseni, the usual Prakrit of Sanskrit drama, was spoken."

Vaishnava dramas are noted for their lyricism. The *slokas* with which the dramas open are an indication and the lyrics that follow in sequence are an expansion of this thematic ideal. These songs are of three types: (i) *bhatimas*; these songs are philosophical in intent and inspiration, (ii) emotive lyrics; the purpose of these lyrics is to evoke an atmosphere and deepen its intensity, and

(iii) *payaras* or narrative songs that describe an incident and thus stimulate the progress of the story. These songs are musical and devotional and aesthetically ennobling and inspiring. Apart from creating a climate for religion which was the principal inspiration behind them, the dramas helped the emergence of a cultural legacy, song and dance, dramatic technique and stage-craft, prose and verse. The Vaishnava age, to be exact, was an age of poetry, and prose was only an occasional flash-in.

Songs were employed as expository vehicle even for principal characters; this affected both characterisation and dialogue. When the dialogue or action becomes repetitive of the ideas or feelings already expressed through songs and other verses, it tends to become colourless and insipid. A few instances may be cited: the discomfiture of Rakshashi Taraka is depicted not in action but transmitted through song. Rama's destruction of Subahu and Marica, two demons who disturbed the peace of Vishwamitra's *asrama*, is vehicled through song and not shown in action. In the same way, certain episodes in *Rukmini harana*, viz., Rukmini's entreaties with Krishna to spare her erring brother's life, the wedding scene between Krishna and Rukmini etc. are embodied in songs. Perhaps songs were used because the depiction of these scenes was not necessary from the angle of art or because the scope for depiction was limited because of the limited nature of the theatre. Not only songs but *nrityas* also are a dramatic technique used by Vaishnava playwrights to dramatise different phases of the situation.

Characterisation, as in Sanskrit drama, was not a major factor in our Vaishnava drama; there are reasons for it. In Sanskrit dramas, the primary emphasis was on the *rasa* element that emanated from the play. In Assamese Vaishnava drama, the emphasis was on religious absorption, on spiritualised accent. When in a drama, the emphasis is thus oriented or shifted, there is little scope for characterisation. Yet, this must be noted that although characters were required to conform to fixed types, characterisation, despite limited nature of the Vaishnava canvas, did not suffer. In scene (ii) of his play *Malavikagnimitram*, Kalidasa has hinted at the *rasa* element

as constituting the quintessence of a drama. In the *prastavana* of his play *Ratimanmatham*, Jagannath Kavi, court-poet of Prince Saraboji (18th century), has a significant verse which can be translated thus :

Some fall a prey to mere beauty of words. Others seek shades of meaning in them. Some others always desire a happy blending of meaning and language. One can even satisfy all such requirements. But to supply to the brim *rasa* is a task not easy of fulfilment by every body.

The element of *rasa* in Assamese classical drama was incidental. But to say that it was deliberately pushed into the shade would be wrong, for, no work of art can sustain itself aesthetically without it. Assamese Vaishnava drama has not only depicted abstract thoughts but concretised them also through the medium of different sentiments (*bhava*) like heroism and noble deeds, remorse and pity, battle and victory.

The purpose of Vaishnava dramas was not so much to create dramatic effect but religious impact. Notwithstanding this, it would not be correct to say that dramatic effect did not exist at all; it existed atleast in the conflict of interest and emotions. This conflict which is the "soul" of all dramas was made spectacular rather than intensive in the psychological sense. This is evident from Sankardeva's plays like *Rukmini harana*, *Parijata harana*, *Rama vijaya*, etc. These are dramas of conflict in the external sense; whatever internal conflict there might be is inept and insignificant.

Elevation of the mind to a spiritualised level was one of the chief aims of this school of classical drama. The characters had to conform to mythological concept; in fact, they had no independent existence, and as such, the scope for the delineation of character was limited. True it is that on occasions the characters reflect human tendencies, but these too were made to conform to set pattern. Judging from these aspects, Assamese Vaishnava drama was circumscribed by the propaganda *motif*; this could not be otherwise in an age the predominant note of which was ethical

and moral preaching. On this account, there must not of course be any hasty conclusion to the effect that Vaishnava drama was aesthetically insipid. Far from being so, dramas like *Rama vijaya*, *Rukmini harana*, *Parijata harana* etc. by Sankardeva and *Arjuna bhanjana* and *Bhojan vihara* by Madhavdeva are artistically and technically landmarks. Sankardeva and Madhavdeva knew how to weave art into the warp of propaganda.

Defining the role of the hero, Bharata Muni says: "He should strive for some worthy or noble object in life and its fulfilment should be the play's purpose." According to Sanskrit aestheticians, the failure of the hero's endeavour is never to be depicted on stage. Even though dramatic events justified failure, he was rescued by a sort of *deus ex machina* from the ordeal. The hero was made a symbol of certain virtues, for, the purpose of classical drama was to re-assure man's faith in the ultimate victory of good over evil.

Broadly speaking, tragedy, as in Sanskrit aesthetics, was largely outside the ken of our Vaishnava drama. This is because it was thought that "visual representation of a tragedy or blood spilling on the stage would affect hearts in such a way that the mind of the seer could not escape brooding over the scene witnessed". The apt answer to this is contained in what the Greeks think of tragedy. According to them, "human hearts get more chastened and human intellect more sublimated on seeing a great tragedy". No great drama is possible if tragedy is kept out of its purview. Even Sanskrit drama, despite its great aesthetic eminence, suffers from this defect. Whatever this maybe, it would be correct to say that some aspects of tragedy are to be found in a few Vaishnava dramas like *Kamsa vadha* and *Ravana vadha*; they constitute a noteworthy departure from accepted Sanskrit drama form.

There was no permanent theatre for the Vaishnava drama; it was performed either in the precincts or commodious halls of *namghars*, places for community prayers. When played in the precincts of religious institutions, it was customary to set up *pandals* called *rabhaghars* for the performance; these *pandals* were either canopied with cloths ornamented with designs or appropriately thatched. Decoration of *pandals* was an integral part of showmanship and art.

There was an altar on which a sacred manuscript, beautifully wrapped with a piece of cloth, was placed in reverence; ancient drama was representation on stage of slices of "religious" life. The Krishna cult constituted the soul of these dramas and it was enjoined that every play should begin in a spirit of reverence: *bhaona karile Krishna pujibe lagaya*.

An arena was set apart for the orchestra; the musicians are collectively known as *gayan-bayan*, those who sing and those who play the instrument. The stage did not have any painted scenes unless Sankardeva's *Chinhajatra* is accepted as such; but at its depth was placed an *arbastra* which was analogous in a sense to the *yavanika* in Sanskrit play; when the characters enter the stage, it was customary to draw a piece of cloth against them; *arbastra* might mean this and not the *yavanika* of the Sanskrit stage.

The *dramatis personae* as in the Burmese *Yama Pwe* enter the stage either dancing or on cadenced feet; the background music was provided by *kholas*, oblong conical type drums. Under expert finger-touch, the *khola* becomes a thing of lyrical melody and an instrument of rhythm. This cadenced entrance of characters is not to be found in Sanskrit plays. The music was attuned to the nature of the characters ushered in. For instance, if it was Bhima, the music was robust and rapid, symbolic of his prowess. If it was a milder character, the music was a soft pattering sound. Because of the mythological or semi-divine character of Vaishnava plays, certain accessories were necessary, the principal one of which was painted masks; this helped to create a semi-mythical illusion of reality. There were some characters, women characters generally, who wore no masks.

ALTHOUGH SANKARDEVA (1449-1569) is the originator of dramatic tradition in Assamese, he is free from the imperfections that pioneers generally fail to rid themselves of. Pioneers simply show the path; others more gifted and of greater skill walking the path are seen generally to overshadow them as Shakespeare did Marlowe and Kalidasa Asvaghosa. In the case of Sankardeva, this however did not happen; he could not be equalled, much less excelled.

Sankardeva has six dramas, apart from *Chinhayatra* that is lost, to his credit. They are *Kaliya-damana*, *Patni-prasada*, *Keli-Gopala*, *Rukmini harana*, *Parijata-harana* and *Rama vijaya*. Our scholars have established that all these dramas were written after Sankardeva's twelve-year sojourn in different cultural centres of northern India. In Bihar and Orissa particularly, during those days, the theatre on Vaishnava theme was greatly popular; it reached a high-water mark of attainments also. About outside influence on Sankardeva, K. R. Mehihi says: "It is also possible, though hardly probable, that the Sanskrit-Prakrit-Maithili drama of Umapati exercised some indirect influence on minor points."

Power of kaleidoscopic appraisal and psychological assessment, grasp and understanding of the theme and above all the depth of poetry, these qualities are all evident in Sankardeva's dramas.

Sanskrit plays are noted for their lyrical stanzas and prose passages, the latter being used mostly for dialogue. A similar technique is followed by our playwrights also, particularly Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. The prose is simple and rhythmic with an elegance; the lyrical stanzas are characterised by a sweep of metre that aptly expresses the wide range of feelings and sentiments. Generally abstruse in idea, *bhatimas* constitute the grand theme of the play; the prose-passages are popular expositions of the high sentiment of the former. To say in a nutshell, Sankardeva whose art is an art of restraint knew well that the didactic *motif* of art yielded no results, if it was not aesthetically absorbing.

(i) *Kaliya-damana* :

The story: A mischievous snake by the name of *Kaliya* lived in a lake called *Kalindi*; he ruled the domain of water here unchallenged and took pleasure in polluting the lake with his deadly poison. One day it so happened that some cowherds with their cattle came to the lake to drink water; drinking that water, they were all dead because it was contaminated by the snake's poison. Krishna who revived them to life wanted to punish *Kaliya* for his mischievous propensities.

With this purpose, Krishna entered the lake, whereupon a deadly fight ensued between him and the serpent. The serpent was so powerful that Krishna lay unconscious for some time in his grip. But in a flash, he released himself from his deadly grip, overpowered the serpent and climbed up to the expanded canopy of his thousand hoods. Thereupon Krishna indulged in one of his cosmic dances; the serpent was on the point of perishing.

Then, remorseful and repentant, the *naga-kanyas*, *Kaliya's* wives, appeared in the scene and prayed to Krishna to spare their husband's life. *Kaliya* too was so much impressed with Krishna's prowess and mystic charm that he resigned himself at his feet. After he was vanquished, the serpent was banished to an island called Ramanaka. The central *motif* of this play, the story of which is borrowed from *Bhagavata Purana*, is Krishna. *Kaliya's* prayer to Krishna is significant from the Vaishnava point of view.

*Garava gucayali mora, visaya apada ghora,
dura kara ava moi, cinto caranaka toe.*

There is a sub-plot in the play which is independent of the main story. After the episode with *Kaliya*, Krishna and the cowherd boys and girls could not return to their respective homes that night; they stayed behind in Vrindabana. At night, there was an accident; a fire broke out and they were engulfed in it. Krishna with his divine power quelled the fire and saved his companions from this imminent danger.

From the point of dramatic propriety, this incident is superfluous and redundant; this is of the nature of a postscript without any inherent link-up with the principal theme. It can be justified only on the grand premise of Vaishnava drama which is religious propaganda. The *sutradhara* plays a dominant role in this play; his individual contributions to the development of the story together with the songs fulfilling a similar function have thrown action and character-delineation through dialogues into a cold shade. The dialogues are not only few in number, but they are vitally weak also.

Whatever that maybe, the drama has a symbolic significance. In another context, Dr. Radhakrishnan has interpreted the conquest of the serpent, *Kaliya*, by Krishna as the victory of one cultural pattern over another, *i.e.*, the Aryan as represented by Krishna conquering the non-Aryan as represented by *Kaliya*. Against the background of this drama, the central *motif* of which is to demonstrate the supremacy of Krishna faith, this particular idea might appear as far-fetched. Notwithstanding this, it is a fact that the serpent *Kaliya* is a symbol of certain baser things of life, *viz.*, pride and futile bravado, intolerance and impiety, things that go counter to the basic tenets of Vaishnava attitude. Krishna's victory is also symbolic; it is the victory of piety over impiety, tolerance over intolerance, compassion over cruelty.

(ii) *Patni-prasada* :

Spiritually significant, the simple theme of this drama is borrowed from the *Bhagavata Purana*. Krishna's cowherd companions, for they

were hungry, approached some Brahmins for food. For the Brahmins refused to recognise Krishna as an incarnate of God, food was bluntly refused. This was reported to Krishna, whereupon he advised his companions to approach the Brahmins' wives. This they did. The Brahmin women were only too ready to comply with the request, for, Krishna to them was an object of ardent devotion. The Brahmins at first resisted, but afterwards they too were converted to the religious aspirations of their womenfolk. This conversion is significant : this is conversion from blind faith in ritual and sacrifice to Krishna cult, as initiated by the Vaishnavas.

This drama focuses a conflict between two trends of thought, ritualistic Brahmanism and the simple faith of the Vaishnavas to whom Krishna is supreme, the one God. The following prayer recited by Narada in honour of Krishna strikes the keynote of the play.

*Tuhu jagata-guru devaka deva,
tohari carane rahaka meri seva,
mukhe jana cadahu tuwa guna nama,
magu ataye vara tohari thama.*

Nowhere the idea that characterisation was of minor interest to Sankaradeva finds better expression than in this drama; the action lacks vitality of exposition and characterisation is no more than fragmentary.

(iii) *Keli-Gopala* :

In the real sense of the term, this drama is a phantasmagoria. It brings into relief the sportive Krishna in an atmosphere of music and moonlight, dance and despair. It is an autumnal night and the setting is the silver sands of the Yamuna, scene of Krishna's youthful sports. On this moonlit night, the melody of Krishna's flute beats in the panorama and draws the cowherd girls of Vrindabana to this scene of starlit night. They come in ecstatic self-abandonment and join the *rasa* dance of which Krishna is the central figure. This is not "trip it gently as you go upon the light fantastic toe" of Milton; it is riotous mirth.

The girls were enamoured of Krishna's charm and personality.

Krishna's attachment and solicitude for them made them slightly self-conscious. They suffered from the vaunted psychology of possessing Krishna as their own. This vanity on the part of the girls displeased Krishna, and as a counter-step, he wanted to inflict some mental torture on them. He disappeared suddenly from the dancing scene with one of the milkmaids to the forest. Lonely and desolate, the girls give vent to their acute sense of desertion and desperation. They suffered from the "throe of the heart".

Krishna then re-appears; with him, joy returns once again to the bower of music and dance; a sense of fulfilment pervades the scene. Krishna and the girls now indulge in a *rasa-mandala* dance with renewed *joie de vivre*. There is nothing but mirth and merriment. Then Krishna and the girls enter into the Yamuna and take to water-sports. Music and moonlight, melancholy and melody, all these lend colour and rhythm to this spiritualised romance. The girls are the media through which divine grace is radiated and Krishna is the symbol of this grace.

This joy continued till dawn. Then, all went home. The scene was repeated over several nights and then an unfortunate incident took place. One night, a demon called Samkhacuda appeared there to the great consternation of the girls. A girl was molested by this demon; this enraged Krishna. Samkhacuda was ultimately killed in a fight.

This *Bhagavata Purana* story, transmuted into the poetic theme of a drama with its "dream lights and music", shows Sankardeva's art at its exuberant best. The drama is noted as much for poetic luxuriance as for restraint, as much for ardent passion as for divine devotion. Nowhere is the central purpose of the play, i.e., divine exaltation, lost sight of. Krishna consoles the girls who were wailing because of separation from him, thus :

*Ava sakhi vilapa tapa tyajaha,
bhakata-vatsala moka jani,
bhakataka dukha dekhi hridi rahe nahi,
Sankare kahaya Hari-vani.*

From the point of romantic fervour, this drama appears to be a

dim echo of Joyadeva's *Gita-Govinda*; of course, it is not as erotic in impulse as the latter. Except Krishna's destruction of Samkhacuda demon, *Keli-Gopala*, like any other poetic play, is not action-oriented in the dramatic sense.

(iv) *Rukmini-harana* :

Rukmini-harana, the subject matter of which is taken from *Harivamsam* and *Bhagavata purana*, is a drama of youthful romance and union, blood and battle. Rukmini was the lovely daughter of king Bhismaka of Kundina. Rukmini and Krishna fall in love with one another as a result of the one coming to know of the other's accomplishments through the narration of two *bhatas*, Suravi and Haridasa by name. Thus the attachment between the two became intense. Rukmini's brother Rukma proved intransigent; he did not want his sister's marriage to be settled with Krishna. He chose a prince Sisupala by name for the hand of his sister.

The marriage was accordingly arranged. Prince Sisupala came to Kundina with his entourage for the purpose. Rukmini became restless, for, her heart was with Krishna. So she sent news of her predicament to Krishna through Vedanidhi, the royal priest, as messenger. Krishna on receiving Rukmini's letter lost no time; he started off immediately from Dwaraka to Kundina. Princes from far and near assembled in Bhismaka's courtyard for the wedding. Rukmini first offered obeisance at the temple of Bhavani, and then appeared before the assembly of guests. Thereupon to her intense delight, Krishna appeared and took her away in his chariot to the utter consternation of Sisupala and other princes.

This drama is noted for its intense moments and clash of personalities and aims. Krishna's deep attachments for those who are devoted to him as also his prowess are vindicated in the play. On seeing Rukmini being carried away, Sisupala and Rukma, aided by other princes, engaged Krishna in battle. In this engagement, Sisupala and the rest were routed. On the entreaty of Rukmini to spare her brother's life, Rukma was granted pardon. Krishna and Rukmini were finally married at Dwaraka.

The character of Rukmini is of impeccable rectitude; in a

restrained way, she symbolises a woman's love which is her "whole-existence". Although the natural amorous attachments of two young souls are projected into the canvas, the playwright is not oblivious of Krishna's divinity nor is Rukmini, despite her deep physical and emotional urge, oblivious of it. Deep in love, dignified in demeanour, wise in counsel and action, Rukmini is the central focus of the drama. The other characters are also portrayed with sympathy and insight.

The high tone of the drama is however vitiated by introduction of such scenes as the following that hover on the border-line of crudity. The princes assembled for the wedding behave in an odd way at the sight of Rukmini's beauty; their amorous propensity is vulgarly evident. Although this cannot be a justification from the point of technique or aesthetics, Sankardeva possibly portrayed these scenes in order to create an atmosphere of popular appeal. The following is an instance :

Tadantare Rukminika navina rupa dekhia jata rajasava kamavane mursita hua asana hante dhali parala. Vihvalla bhabe kahu karajuri bola—he pranesvari, kamasagare nistara karaha. Kahu mukhe anguli laia bola—he pranapriya, madane mana mardaya, hamaka haste nirikhana karaha.

(v) *Parijata-harana* :

The story of the drama, an assemblage of incidents from three different sources, *Vishnu Purana*, *Harivamsam* and *Bhagavata Purana*, centres round a *parijata* flower and the natural jealousies of Krishna's two wives, Rukmini and Satyabhama. The exhilarating role played by sage Narada in rousing the anger and apathy of Satyabhama is an interesting episode of the drama. Narada is a darling of the masses; his character conforms to a familiar picture in Assam's rural landscape i.e., the wandering minstrel. King Narakasura of Pragjyotisapura became a menace to the gods; he challenged their might and forcibly abducted from Indra the ear-rings of Aditi, Varuna's umbrella, the Mani-parvata and some maidens of heaven. Without Krishna's help, it was impossible to subdue Narakasura and recover all these from him.

One day Indra came to Krishna together with Narada to report about these incidents and seek the latter's assistance against Narakasura. Narada who carried a *parijata* flower with him presented it to Krishna. Incidentally Rukmini was present there at that time. Krishna lovingly fixed the *parijata* flower in her hair. This was an opportunity for Narada to start off a mischief. He went posthaste to Satyabhama, another spouse of Krishna, and reported to her about Krishna's dedication of the *parijata* flower to Rukmini. On hearing this, Satyabhama was extremely agitated with envy and anger. Thus was the way to the climax of the drama laid by Narada's wily tricks; she became hysteric over the matter and would not touch any food or drink. Narada then came back to Krishna and told him about the anger and displeasure of Satyabhama.

Krishna came to Satyabhama, but she was in such a terrific mood that all attempts to console her failed; she would not listen to any excuses. Ultimately Krishna had to assure her that the *parijata* plant itself would be transplanted from the garden of paradise and presented to her. This assurance soothed her ulcerated feelings to a certain extent. Thereupon Krishna asked Narada to procure a flower from heaven with Indra's permission; here Indra stood on principle : no heavenly flower could be spared for an earthly woman. This angered Krishna. He himself went to Amaravati and uprooted the plant which enraged Indra and he offered stiff resistance. In this encounter, Indra was defeated. The *parijata* plant was taken away from heaven and re-planted near Satyabhama's palace.

About the other side of the story, Krishna encountered Narakasura and killed him. All the articles robbed by him, including the ear-rings of Aditi and the heavenly maidens, were recovered from Pragjyotisapura. Satyabhama accompanied her husband to the battlefield; on their way back to Dwaraka, she saw the *parijata* flower blooming in the *nandana* garden; she desired a flower from it. The two issues are dovetailed into an admirable pattern.

Noted for its power of observation and characterisation, the play is enlivened with Narada's innocent mischiefs, natural jealousies

of women, pulsating passion and combat of heroism. Notwithstanding this, the poet's natural instinct for catering to the vulgar taste of his audience, as evident from the dialogue of abuse between Satyabhama and Sacci, Indra's wife, over the *parijata* flower, deprives the play of its elemental strength and beauty. Each woman abuses the other of her husband's sexual promiscuity and affairs with other women. Sacci accuses Krishna of sexual complicity with the women of Gokula—*unikara agu Gokulaka stri nahi rahala*,—and Satyabhama accuses Indra of sexual transgression with the harlots of Amaravati, besides that with Gautama's wife Ahalya under false impersonation,—*dekho Amaravatika yata vesya tohaka svamika se nahi antala. Tohari swami kayali ki. Gautama risika bharjya Ahalya taheka mayakari kahu jati bhrasta kayala*.

Notwithstanding these minor blemishes, this drama has the stamp of Sankardeva's intellectual maturity. The characters are presented in relief; the action is not insipid nor is dialogue inept. The two concurrent incidents, defeat of Narakasura for his intransigence and that of Indra for his obstinacy, are dovetailed into a single, coherent dramatic pattern through skilfully executed climax and denouement. In fact, Narada is the pivot round whose machination the play revolves; he is not its hero in the strict sense of the term, yet, the role he plays is of absorbing dramatic interest. Particularly because of this focus, all other characters, including Krishna and Satyabhama, sink into dim lights. In their mental attitude and conduct, the two women-characters, Rukmini and Satyabhama, strike a contrast; the former is dignified of mien and demeanour, the latter is flippant of conduct and approach. To say in a nutshell, in her capacity for abusive language and vitriolic outbursts, Satyabhama has no peer. This diseased psychology has added an edge to her character, natural frailties a woman is instinctively "heir to".

On the other hand, Rukmini is of quiet nature; if her words betray anything, it is nobility of character; they are deep in thought and spiritual realisation. The following words of Rukmini addressed to Satyabhama are an illustration in point.

*Ki kahaisa, jagataka parama guru Sri Krishna! unikara sarana seva
karite brahmāṇḍa bhitarē kona bastu thika! Dharma, artha, kama,
moksa savi padarakha hate milawe! tohari parijata kona katha.*

Parijata-harana expresses moods and temper that are nearer to life; both dialogues and situation convey this impression. The dialogues are vibrant with verve and vitality, a fact that gives dramatic effectiveness to the situation.

(vi) *Rama vijaya*

The story of this drama is mainly based on the *adikanda* of Valmiki's Ramayana. Two *rakshashas*, Marica and Subahu, used to cause depredations on Visvamitra's *asrama*; he could not attend to his rituals and sacrifices in peace. Thereupon the sage approached Dasaratha, king of Ayodhya, who allowed his two sons, Rama and Lakshmana, to proceed forthwith and give relief to the sage. In the encounter that followed, the demons were routed. Sage Visvamitra took Rama and Lakshmana to the court of king Janaka where the *svayamvara* of the king's daughter, Sita, was held. Princes from different parts of the country assembled there. At the *svayamvara* place, the huge bow of Shiva, *ajagava* or *Hara-dhanu*, was lodged with the pawn that whosoever present there succeeded in bending the bow and fixing an arrow in it would be entitled to the hand of Sita.

One by one, the princes in the congregation tried and failed; not to speak of bending it, they could not even lift it. To Rama, it was easy; he lifted the bow, fixed an arrow and in trying to bend it, broke it in the middle. There was a divine prophecy that Sita would be united with Rama. This came true; the bow, having been lifted and broken, Sita came forward and garlanded her paramour, Rama. The beauty of Sita is suggested through an exquisite *bhatima* meant to be sung by the *sutradhara*.

*Kanaka salakha anguli karu soka,
Banduli nindi adhara karu kanti,
Dadimba nivida vija danta panti,
Isata hasita madana moha jai,*

*Nasa tilaphula kamalini mai,
 Nava yauvana tana badari pramana,
 Uru karikara kati dambaruka thana,
 Pada pankaja nava pallava panti,
 Campaka pakari anguli karu kanti,
 Nakhacaya caru canda parakasa,
 Lahu lahu mattagajagamana vilasa,
 Kata lavanu vihi nirmala jani,
 Kokila-nada amiya jhure vani.*

Rama's success was sufficient humiliation to the assembled princes; they all combined to attack Rama, only to be defeated in his hands. After the formal wedding, Rama and Sita set off with their entourage for Ayodhya. On the way, Rama was attacked by sage Parasurama who was enraged, for, the former broke the *ajagava*, a bow that belonged to the sage's master, Shiva. Parasurama was so frantic that in fury he bit his own shoulders. The intensity of this high-toned situation is brought out through sharp incisive dialogues as also through recitations of the *sutradhara*. All the entreaties of Rama's father, Dasaratha,—*mathe khera dharo hamaka putradana dehu*,—fell flat on Parasurama; he would not bend. In the engagement that followed, Parasurama was defeated and by way of further punishment, his path to heaven was blocked forever. This victory is symbolic; it symbolises the victory of Vaishnavism over Shaivism of which Parasurama was an ardent disciple.

Rama vijaya is a drama of heroism and brave deeds, of conflict and victory of good over evil. Rama, who is an ideal character noted for equipoise of mind and physical prowess, is the main focus of the play. To Vaishnava saint-poets, the mark of perfection of any literary work rested on its capacity to stir the deeper waters of the soul rather than agitate the senses, i.e., to paint the ideal so that it might appeal to the soul. In the context of it, all references to the senses are only incidental; they are a device to prepare the mind for the reception of the spiritualised ideal. Rama's character is put in an aura of devotion thus :

*Ramaka carane sarana lehu jani,
Sava aparadha marakha tuhu svami.*

As in *Rukmini harana*, so in *Rama vijaya*, the elegant exposition of the story is affected by the introduction of a scene,—presumably to feed the vulgar instincts of the audience,—of low conduct of the assembled princes in the *svayamvara* at the sight of Sita and the humiliation inflicted on them by the maids. Such vulgar utterances of the princes,—*he rajanandini, madane hamara mana mardaya, priya, hamaka haste parakha*,—are non-essentials from the point of dramatic propriety. Barring this, it is a drama with an austere *motif* and the exposition of the theme through songs and recitations, dialogues and action, is aesthetically illuminating.

Madhavdeva (1489-1596) has to his credit five dramas. They are *Arjuna bhanjana*, *Cordhora*, *Bhumilutiwa*, *Pimpara gucuwa* and *Bhojana vihara*. Of these plays, the first and the last ones in particular reveal artistic acumen, power of observation and the quality of restraint that invariably distinguishes Madhavdeva as an artist. Not for technical reasons, but for reasons with grass-roots embedded in human psychology, the most popular of his plays are *Cordhora* and *Pimpara gucuwa*. They depict living portraits of Krishna's child-life with all the heaven-born innocence and simplicity of heart and behaviour. The childhood pictures of Krishna depicted by Madhavdeva are bright as sunlight and fresh as morning dew; in this perspective, Yasodadevi is a living Madonna. These descriptions supplement the pictures of youthful Krishna, originally depicted by Sankardeva whose canvas of experience was much wider. The canvas of Madhavdeva, a life-celebrate, is naturally limited, and yet his pictures of child-life are psychologically penetrating. To be exact, Krishna is his dream-child, nurtured in the cradle of imagination by a life-celebrate who must have been suffering from the psychology of inadequacy.

Though not of the plot-within-a-plot type, in Madhavdeva's *Cordhora*, there are two parallel snapshots: (i) Yasodadevi's anxious search for Krishna who like any other child often escapes his mother's sight and rambles about far from home, and (ii) Krishna's

childish pranks creating problems for his mother. Not only these parallel episodes weave an artistic pattern, but they also imbue it with the flower-like tenderness of childhood aspirations. The drama *Pimpara gucuwa* is almost identical in psychology.

Madhavdeva's dramas are generally known as *jhumura* as against some of the Vaishnava dramas described as *yatras*. Sankardeva's first drama, *Chinhayatra*, supposed to be composed during the closing years of the 15th century and now lost to posterity, was known as *yatra*, a word reminiscent of religious associations. According to scholars, the word "yatra" means "melodramatic performance", if not religious processions as one understands from Vaishnava poems like *Ghunuca yatra*. According to K. R. Medhi, *jhumura* means "a short piece of one-Act drama in which the songs supply the whole plot". Except *Arjuna bhanjana*, Madhavdeva's dramas are fragmentary in character, and presumably it is because of this that the term *jhumura* is applied to them. In his dramas, action is invariably on a low-key and the plot-development, from the point of dramatic effect, is weak and feeble. Barring Yasoda and Krishna, drawn in attractive relief, the rest of the characters are in sepia rather than in full focus of colour. Notwithstanding this, Madhavdeva's dramas of Krishna's child-life possess a rhythm of their own. Invariably it is the human rather than the divine aspect of Krishna's character that enjoys the real focus; despite this, the playwright cannot be said to be oblivious of the central purpose that Vaishnava dramas are generally charged with, i.e., the glorification of Krishna as a divine symbol. In Madhavdeva's dramas, this picture is usually projected through Yasodadevi.

He bapu Krishna, tohu hamari kuti purusaka parama devata, mathaka mukuta, sirara bhusana, golara satsari, karnara kundala, korara kankana.

In intimate portrayal of scenes and use of homely imageries, a thing for which Madhavdeva is pre-eminently noted, *Arjuna bhanjana* is fairly well-known. The cowherd-girls come running and tell Yasoda that the milk on the fire was overflowing the

vessel. The child, Krishna, was at her breast then. Hurriedly she put him on the ground and ran to the kitchen to put the boiling milk out of fire. Krishna was angry at this sudden interruption. The child threw mischievously a stone at Yasoda's churning clay-pot and it broke. The milk ran on the ground.

The child's mischief did not end there. He spoilt the stock of butter, ate what he could and distributed what he could not to the monkeys near-about. To prevent further mischief, she wanted to fetter the child, but, mysteriously enough, each time she tried, each time the fetters fell insufficient by a few inches. Then, eventually she fastened him to a mortar and left. As his mother was out of sight, Krishna dragged the mortar with him and as he did so, two *arjuna* trees that were nearby fell down with a crash. The sound attracted the cowherd boys in the neighbourhood; they came and released Krishna from bondage.

The story is based on the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Vilvamangala stotra*.

The furor created by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva for play-writing caught on and proved a great temptation for subsequent writers. "To paint the ideal in order to elevate the mind" was no doubt an inspiration, but judging from the forced emphasis laid by these writers on the religio-ethical aspect of art, it is evident that the avowed aim of artistic idealisation suffered largely in their hands through unconscious suppression of feelings.

The *Bhawana* or Vaishnava theatre for which these dramas were composed gained an added fillip under the Ahoms; the patronage so achieved served as encouragement towards the growth and development of Vaishnava drama in the post-Sankardeva period. It was accepted as an item on the agenda of court-entertainment; the play used to be especially ordered when honoured guests like neighbouring tribal chiefs paid visits to the Ahom courts. There are evidences of dramas like *Ravana vadha*, *Rukmini harana*, *Padmavati harana* etc. being performed in the courts of king Rajeswara Singha (1751-1769), Kamaleswara Singha (1795-1810) and Gaurinath Singha (1780-1795).

Assamese dramatic literature grew under the auspices of the

Vaishnava renaissance over a period of one hundred years or so *i.e.* from the latter part of the 15th century to that of the 16th century. This was the most fruitful period of our classical drama and, then, slowly the process of decline in the popularity of drama as a creative art set in. Although history speaks of the writing of a few dramas even in Sanskrit during the 18th century, the drama as a whole could not attain any significant success and sustain itself for long. The art of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva was inspired by the *elan* of a mission; with them, it was spiritual absorption, canalised into fruitful channels of creative responses.¹

Barring Gopala Ata, the rest of the playwrights of the subsequent generation could not exhibit any mastery of the art; although they chose mythological themes mostly for treatment in the tradition of their predecessors, their art appears to be repetitive and imitative at its best. Gopala Ata has three dramas to his credit, all based on the *Bhagavata Purana*. They are *Janmayatra*, *Nandutsava* and *Gopi-Uddhava-samvada*. Of these three, the second appears to be an extension of the first and this is why some scholars have refused to acknowledge the independent entity of *Nandutsava* as a drama. *Janmayatra* had the blessings of Madhavdeva who witnessed it when it was first performed in the premises of the *kirtanghara* at Bhavanipura. It is an artistic play, a tribute to Gopala Ata's craftsmanship. Madhavdeva was so impressed with the artistic quality of the drama that he allowed a *Bargita* which opens as "*Harika bayana heri mai*" by Sankardeva to be incorporated in the play. *Janmayatra* deals with the story of Krishna's birth and Kamsa's intransigence against this fateful birth. The emphasis in this drama is on the story-element and mythopoetic association rather than on any didactic purpose, the life-pulse of Vaishnava drama. In point of imagery and spiritualised accent, some of the songs embodied in this drama like *Alo mai*, *Gokule udaya Yadumani* are in the best traditions of songs composed by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva; only an artistically acute mind could compose songs of such depth and sensitive appeal.

From the point of dramatic values, *Gopi-Uddhava-samvada* is of inferior quality; with twenty five songs interspersed in the play,

it is more a lyrical rhapsody than a drama in the strict sense of the term. There is no conflict, no dramatic action and no proper characterisation in this play. It is so much emotionally surcharged with the agony and heart-throbs of the maidens of Gokula, because of Krishna's long absence from them, that there is no scope left for action in the drama. It is action that breathes life into characters, and it is the absence of this primary condition that saps life out of this play to the length of making it stale and flat.

In these dramas, the preponderance of Brajabuli is largely minimised; this process of mellowing down or ushering in regular Assamese conversational diction and words started with Madhavdeva, *i.e.*, before Gopala Ata emerged. Besides this innovation, under the auspices of Madhavdeva, the preponderating role of the *sutradhara* was also reduced as far as possible; this marked a departure from Sankardeva's technique. The *sutradhara's* influence being minimised, it contributed to the development of dialogues as a dramatic medium to a certain extent.

Of the minor dramatists that followed, Ramacharana Thakura is most well-known. He has only one drama to his credit, *Kamsa vadha*. Apart from other dramatic features like the use of *nand slokas*, *bhatimas* and *payaras*, this drama technically compares favourably with the best of Sankardeva's plays. Ramacharana Thakura was well-versed in Sanskrit and this proficiency was for him an added strength; the action of the drama moves in a crescendo and although not bold in relief, the characters do exist; the songs and *payaras* add to the exposition of the plot. The plot is a series of embellished incidents and episodes from Balarama killing a wrestler Mustika by name to Krishna inflicting death on Kamsa for releasing his parents from captivity under him.

Daityari Thakura is credited with two plays: *Nrisimhayatra* and *Syamanta harana*. His contemporary Bhusana Dwija has to his credit a drama called *Ajamila upakhyaana*. In both the dramas of Daityari Thakura, the influence of Sankardeva's story poems *Prahlada carita* and *Syamanta harana* is pronounced; yet, they are not blatant imitation. Unlike other Vaishnava dramas of Sankardeva's times, dialogues, both qualitatively and quantitatively, play a significant

role in these two dramas. This tendency is carried on and adequately reflected in *Ajamila upakhyana* by Bhusana Dwija. The full-fledged emergence of dialogue as an instrument of dramatic expression naturally diminished the role of the *sutradhara* as key-character. The opening *bhatima* of this drama is couched in Assamese, a departure that further helped to reduce the importance of Brajabuli as *modus operandi* of classical drama.

Of the other dramas of the period, mention may be made of *Phalguyatra* by Yadumanideva, *Subhadra harana* by Ramadeva, *Kumara harana* by Rucideva, *Sita harana*, *Durvasa bhojana* and *Balicalana* by Gopala and *Sindhuyatra* by Purnakanta. *Phalguyatra* is a drama of Krishna's romantic ecstasy, particularly with the women of Vrajadhama on the occasion of Phalgutsava. This drama presents a series of pictures, often documentary in character, pictures of spraying of colour and merriment. The woman with whom Krishna eloped into the forest in order to torture the other women with the pangs of separation for their arrogance in Sankardeva's *Keli-Gopala* is supposed to be Radha by some scholars; there is, of course, no authentic evidence to support this idea. Radha is not the prima donna of Assamese Vaishnava poetry or drama. It can be said that it is for the first time that Radha is introduced in Assamese Vaishnava literature through this drama, *Phalguyatra*. Here Radha is depicted as the principal character in that charmed circle of women who sprinkled coloured powder on Krishna. From the standpoint of thematic departure, this drama is significant.

Subhadra harana is a drama of elopement and ultimate union. The climax of the drama is reached when enraged at the abduction of his sister, Balarama is ready for an armed conflict with Arjuna. The situation is however brought under control by the intervention of Krishna on behalf of Arjuna. The entire drama, dialogue and song, is in Brajabuli. Under the auspices of playwrights like Gopala who wrote plays like *Sita harana*, *Durvasa bhojana* etc. the *muktavali* metre, conspicuous by its absence in the compositions of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, was introduced. The following is an example from *Sita harana*.

*Ha prana Sila geli kona bhita
 Nasa ki nimite
 Tohora santape kene prana dhari ache.
 etc. etc.*

To sum up, the preponderating position assigned to verse by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva in the dramas of this period deprived dramatic action of its sinews and strength to a fair extent. Erotic references, as evident in the dramas of the later period verging mostly on vulgarity, contributed to popular entertainment, but deprived drama of its religious austerity and aroma. Depth of understanding was sacrificed on the altar of popular needs of entertainment and the requisites of art on the altar of vulgarity. From the point of the spectacular, these decadent dramas are effective, but from the point of deeper artistic significance, they are sterile and barren. In the later dramas Assamese came to replace Brajabuli completely; this tendency that permeated deep into the 19th century became pronounced during the closing years of the 18th. This is at best an age of melodrama. The motive force that inspired Assamese Vaishnava drama of the early period dwindled into decadence and what remained of its former self, its soul, was a mere shell. The shell with its artificially bright outer cast continued to inspire people simply because of its hallowed tradition and past associations.

Assamese Vaishnava drama that attained its high-water mark of excellence under the auspices of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva and their contemporaries subsequently took to manneristic tendencies, only to dissipate itself into decadence. This is because playwrights of this period lacked artistic qualities; the inspiration of a mission, deep and austere in appeal, failed to sway and stir these lesser minds into positive artistic responses. The drama became a mere pastime and like most other pastimes of a non-serious type, it tended to become flippant.

old prose

IN AN age, the predominant note of which was folk-poetry and other metrical compositions, versified metaphysics and knowledge—even most of the scientific treatises of the age on arithmetic, astronomy, medicine etc. were written in metrical form—prose seemed to be an intruder into the precincts set apart for the Muses. Yet then, old Assamese prose evolved and developed from the 16th to the 18th century with an *elan* and ethos peculiarly its own. This prose can broadly be divided thus: (i) religio-ethical, and (ii) historical and secular. To be more precise, one is the *sattrā* (monastic) and the other is the *burānji* (chronicle) style of prose. Other categories of old Assamese prose like that of *caritā puthis* and *mantra sastras* come in-between these two broad divisions. Speaking about the two distinctive styles of prose, Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji says:

The *sattrā* style represents Sanskrit learning and culture, and preferred a highly Sanskritic vocabulary; and the court style, as in the *burānjis* and letters and documents, reflected the life around much more faithfully and revelled in the use of pure Assamese words and words in common use—no matter from what source they were borrowed, Ahom or Bodo, Perso-Arabic or other foreign.

Prose as an accepted literary medium made its debut in the *ankiya natas*, one-Act plays of Sankardeva; this constitutes the starting point in the history of old Assamese prose. Prose, as already pointed out, was principally employed as a medium for dialogues in dramas. It is difficult to say why Sankardeva chose to make this departure from the established tradition of the time. Classical Indian drama was essentially musical in form. All the different forms of drama that classical and medieval dramaturgic and literary works make mention of like *rasak*, *sattak*, *sangeetak* and *geya-rupak* were sung and danced rather than enacted in the formal sense. In the well-known Prakrit drama *Karpuramanjari* of the 11th century, it is said: "*sattakam nrititavyam*" i.e., *sattaka* is to be danced. All these dramas used verse-dialogues.

In the context of this established Indian tradition, Sankardeva's preference for prose as medium of dialogues is significant. It was his deep passion for the people for whom he wanted to make abstract metaphysical truths intelligible and easy of comprehension that was possibly responsible for his instinctive preference for prose as dramatic dialogue. Or possibly prose was introduced with an eye to imparting an easy conversational modulation to his dialogues so as to make them more lively and dynamic in appeal. Though in Brajabuli, the prose of *ankiya natas* is neat and absorbing in its cadenced flow; more often than not, it is embellished in the manner of poetic diction. The assonances and alliterations, imageries and illustrations involved in the style help to sharpen rather than submerge the inherent lucidity and beauty of these prose-dialogues. Often they remind one of the grace and elegance of modern *verse libre*, initiated by French writers.

Though in Brajabuli, Vaishnava prose of the dramas is embellished and enriched with homely imageries and natural speech modulation. Because of the homely truths in them, some of these expressions of Vaishnava writers, both in prose and verse, have gone deep into the pattern of popular speech like some of Shakespeare's expressions in *Hamlet* becoming indistinguishable from common English speech. Even the crude dialogue, the abusive prose bandied between Sacci and Satyabhama in Sankardeva's

Parijata harana is marked by a certain quality of lucidity and rhythm.

There was a progressive shift under Madhavdeva's auspices; it was this Vaishnava playwright who for the first time registered a departure from Sankardeva and introduced, particularly in the narrative portions of his dramas, indigenous Assamese words into the Brajabuli pattern of prose and gave its structure a local idiom.

Pakhia Yasoda kope kola hante matita thakacai thaia lawari khira rakhita gela.

Thus was a new effect brought into force in the nuances of old Assamese prose. This steady shift is significant in the sense that it was the starting point of a process that ultimately yielded concrete results in the hands of subsequent Vaishnava playwrights; thus the foundation of early Assamese prose was laid by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva and their compatriots of the classical drama.

But the real father of Assamese ethico-religious prose like that of Italian prose being Giovanni Boccaccio is Bhattadeva; he is said to have lived between 1558 and 1638 A.D. His prose works are *Katha Bhagavata* and *Katha Gita*. These treatises are a landmark of old Assamese literature; like the compositions of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, they helped to bring the fundamentals of Vaishnava ethics and religion nearer home to the people. Dr. B. Kakati says :

The religious fervour Sankardeva created caught on and innumerable books mostly in verse were composed by his followers. The enthusiasm to make the scriptures accessible to the people in vernacular was so great that sometime after Sankardeva, a certain teacher of the school of Sankardeva named Bhattadeva translated the entire *Bhagavat Gita* and the *Bhagavata Purana* into Assamese prose in about 1593.

From the "linguistic points of view", Dr. Kakati however dismisses Bhattadeva's prose as "overloaded with Sanskritic words". And so it does "not give any idea of the spoken language of the time". Dr. B. M. Barua, a noted Buddhist scholar, seems to agree with this view, for, according to him, Assamese prose, strictly speaking, originated with the historical chronicles under Ahom

auspices. Speaking of Bhattadeva's *Katha Gita* and *Katha Bhagavata*, Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji on the other hand says that it "was no mean achievement for an Indian language at a time when prose was but rarely cultivated in the literature of India" to have "evolved a finished prose style in the 16th century".

One thing must be said to the credit of Bhattadeva that it was he who for the first time openly discarded the use of Brajabuli as a Vaishnava literary vehicle. In order to impart a well-knit structure to his spiritually balanced style, it is quite but natural that he had to depend primarily on Sanskrit vocables. What Greek and Latin are to English and most other European languages, Sanskrit is to the Indian languages; Assamese is no exception. It is this "strong intellectual and spiritual bond" with Sanskrit, as in the case of other Indian literatures, both Aryan and Dravidian, that has made old Assamese literature essentially pan-Indian in character. This must be said that Bhattadeva was a great scholar in Sanskrit; it is this knowledge that has given his prose style, however archaic at times it might be, an elegance and equipoise. In preparing the texts of the *Bhagavata Gita* and *Bhagavata Purana* in Assamese, Bhattadeva must have consulted extensively the available prose commentaries on these treatises; it is this perhaps that is responsible for the preponderance of Sanskrit vocables in his prose renderings.

Bhattadeva's prose is distinctive in style. In *Katha Gita*, the abstruse and metaphysical ideas of the Sanskrit original are presented in a lucid and coherent style; the words flow in a measured sequence and the total impression created is one of "sweetness and simplicity" as of the original *Gita*. To be brief, like Bertrand Russell of contemporary times, Bhattadeva made "philosophy readable". The following is an example of a *Gita sloka* rendered into Assamese prose.

Sanskrit sloka :

*Yada yada hi dharmasya glanirbhavati Bharata,
Abhyuthanamadharmasya tadatmanam srijamyaham,
Paritranaya sadhunam binasayacha duskritam,
Dharmasamsthapanarthaya sambhavami yuge yuge.*

Assamese rendering :

*Yekhana dharmara hani adharmara udbhava haya tekhane sadhura
raksarthe durjanara nasa nimitte dharma pratipalana pade yuge yuge
mayi avatara dharo.*

In literature and art, it is the emancipation of thought that serves as a crucial factor in stimulating creativeness. Lucidity and unobtrusiveness in expression are the concomitants of intellectual maturity; the more one is intellectually mature, the more lucid he is in expression. This is true of Bhattadeva and his prose; his language is aptly keyed to the nature of thought that he wanted to express. While expressing metaphysical and spiritual thoughts and ideas, the style could be elegant and restrained; on occasions like this, the preponderance of Sanskrit vocables is evident. Despite the fact that it is divorced from "spoken language", the style of Bhattadeva is clear, concise and passionately graphic. The *Katha Gita* is an instance in point. Its intellectualised language shows a certain maturity of ideas; to be brief, the style is introspective and interpretative rather than abstruse and oblique.

There are occasions on which Bhattadeva's style tends to become homely, terse and racy like commonplace speech; in the depiction particularly of mythological incidents and episodes, the style gains a vivifying terseness, thus making the description homely in colour and rhythm. Although not a credential for good prose, often because of the inherent poetical quality, Bhattadeva's prose is described as non-metrical rhythmic poetry. If emotion is the parent of rhythm, then, it is true of all religious literature, whether prose or verse. Religion, as commonly understood, is institutionalised emotion; as such, any artistic or literary medium giving expression to such an idea is bound to be emotional and poetic in content and spirit. In fact, Bhattadeva's style is cold philosophic logic deftly woven into the language of emotion and poetical *finesse*. About his prose style, Dr. B. K. Barua says :

He (Bhattadeva) created a surefooted expository prose style with an eye to grammatical perfection. His aim was to explain religious matters in a logical and clear manner, and in this

Bhattadeva succeeded to a large extent. His conversational and argumentative prose style of *Katha-Gita* served as a model and pattern to the Vaishnavite prose-writers of philosophical matters of later years and his simpler and freer style of *Katha Bhagavata* greatly influenced the writers of *carita puthis*.

What is the source of inspiration behind Bhattadeva's prose-literature? Is it specifically Sanskrit or Maithili with which it can be said to be in "general agreement"? Though Sanskrit *gadya* (prose) is apparently free from metrical limitations, it is not exactly the type we understand by prose today. We must not forget that Sanskrit prose has an inherent rhythmic quality, musical like versified compositions. As both come within the compass of *sravya kavyas*, the difference between Sanskrit *padya* (metrical) and *gadya* (non-metrical) literary compositions is naturally thin.

Sanskrit *gadya kavyas* are further divided into two categories thus: (i) *akhyayikas*, and (ii) *kathas*. Bhattadeva, whose knowledge of Sanskrit was profound, and both the works by him are *kathas*, must have known Bana bhatta's *Katha Kadambari*, the "intoxicating style and exhaustive treatment of subjects" of which "have not many equals in the field of prose". Reading the *Katha Kadambari* one has the impression as though the "author himself is speaking in clear tones". Likewise, Bhattadeva's *Katha Gita* produces the impression of a discourse conducted in a religious assembly by a man who is well-versed in the subject. On the other hand, referring to the earliest extant Maithili prose-work *Varna ratnakara* (c. 1325) of Jyotirisvara Thakura, Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji says:

The possibility of a strong Maithili influence on early Assamese becomes quite a probability when we find a general agreement between the style of prose in the early stages of the two languages.

Dr. Chatterji has not however elaborated his thesis.

Following Bhattadeva, religio-ethical prose in Assamese gained a momentum; several prose-writers like Parasurama and Raghunath Mahanta emerged under its auspices. Parasurama's *Katha Ghosa*,

written in 1715 A.D., is a prose rendering of Madhavdeva's *Nam Ghosa*. Another noteworthy prose-work of this period is *Padma-purana* composed in 1618 A.D. It is a guide in lucid prose to morals and religion; so far it has not been possible to establish its authorship. Raghunath Mahanta who wrote *Katha Ramayana* in the tradition of Bhattadeva's *katha*-style belonged to the first half of the 18th century; it is a free prose rendering rather a paraphrase of the original Sanskrit epic. The influence of Sanskrit style and words, as in Bhattadeva's *Katha Gita*, is pronounced in this work. While Bhattadeva built up a prose-tradition, his followers, except indulging in imitation, could not contribute or subscribe to a rejuvenated prose style. Geniuses are always an independent efflorescence; they are not bound by set rules or axioms. Bhattadeva is an example.

(ii) *Mantra and Carita-puthi Prose* :

Assamese *mantra* literature is an offspring of religious superstition, animistic ideas and magic natural to an Indo-Mongoloid society. Embedded in the religious beliefs of a primitive nature, the purpose of this esoteric literature was essentially utilitarian. Such a belief appealing so powerfully to man's imagination and ardour must have emerged before the Vaishnava faith, initiated by Sankardeva; logically enough, it continued to co-extend with the Vaishnava faith deep into the succeeding years. Incantation and sorcery, magic rituals and divination by crude methods constituted the principal avenues of its diluted expression. The *Ain-i-Akbari* has described "a process of divination by the examination of a child cut out of the body of a pregnant woman who has gone her full term of months".

To be brief, the *mantra puthis* throw a comprehensive light on the beliefs, superstitions and ancient spiritual customs of the Assamese people; some of them are charms against diseases, some against evil spirit, snake-bites, etc. These *mantra puthis* must have been composed by anonymous authors at different periods of time. In some of the *mantras*, there are allusions to the *Koran* as also to Mohammad. In some others, references to Firingi also appear.

Judging from these allusions, it can safely be concluded that these particular *mantras* must be later-day compositions and these references find place in them as esoteric symbols of mysterious association. Whatever that maybe, that the earliest of these *mantras* must have been composed in the age of dark faith, spoken of so succinctly by Sir E. A. Gait, prior to the emergence of Vaishnavism in the 15th century, there can be no doubt. The most popular of these *mantra puthis* are : *Karati puthi*, *Virajara puthi*, *Sapara dharani mantra*, *Sarvadhaka mantra*, *Suci mantra*, *Mohini mantra* etc.

Some of these *mantras* or magic incantations, particularly of the primitive period, show evidences of Buddhistic impact. The reasons are self-expository. This belief, supported and supplemented by a literature of its own, i.e., *mantra* literature, had its birth in the corrupt practices that evolved out of the vulgar phases of primitive magic and Sakta *tantrism* coalescing with certain esoteric forces of Buddhism as it turned towards its morbid decline.

The prose of *mantra* literature by its very nature is rudimentary and incoherent. Often it is a disjointed array of words and is totally "free from the rigours of grammar". Words were set in a formal structure not because they were meant to convey any coherent meaning or significance, but because they were believed to be surcharged with certain magic purposes. Every word used is supposed to have certain power of magic and on its capacity to stimulate magical effects that the choice of a particular word depended. Words such as *Om*, *ain*, *hrin*, *srin* etc. used in *mantras* are magical symbols without any coherent meaning. The word *Om* was possibly used to spiritualise *mantras* with a Vedic veneer; there are *mantras* that bear references to the Vedas as such, particularly the *Atharvaveda*.

We must not forget that even the language of Sanskrit *mantras*, so intimately connected with the Brahmanas and the Upanishads, "appears peculiar enough to be distinguished from the other Vedic texts". By their very nature, *mantras* tend to be esoteric. Even the *mantras* of refined Buddhistic literature are esoteric, and the language incoherent. This is because in keeping with the spirit of *mantras*, the language had to be aptly modulated so that it might

be made capable of adding mystery to the veiled world of magic. This explains why the language of *mantras*, whether Buddhistic or Assamese, is basically incoherent and mystery-laden.

There are often fine passages of a descriptive nature in *mantra puthis* like *Sudarsana karati*: these are a milestone in the historical development of old Assamese prose literature. The following is a description of Brahma's court in *Sudarsana karati*: *Brahmadeva bahi ache camatkara kari*. Thus, it goes on to describe Brahma in the company of other gods like Indra, Kuvera, Varuna in "gorgeous array". Besides, there is in it the description of spirits in contrast to the heavenly grandeur of the gods: *karo eko khana kana kulara samana*, spirits with ears as big as a winnowing fan. The prose of this particular *mantra puthi* in which sentences follow a classical sequence, has refrain, rhythm and alliteration and shows considerable emancipation of thought, a result possibly of imperceptible Vaishnava impact. Judging from the expressive quality of its language, this work is a significant landmark in the history of early Assamese prose. In this connection, we must not forget that *mantras* are a taboo under Vaishnava *nama-dharma* dispensation.

The *carita puthis*, whether in prose or verse, are a bold experiment in the art of biography. The main purpose of these biographies, *carita puthis* on Vaishnava saints like Sankardeva and Madhavdeva in particular, written by their spiritual followers was to create a sort of religious impact through the reconstruction of the lives of saints. These biographies are significant from the point of history because they not only bring into focus life and doings of the saints in a reverential spirit, but also throw a flood of light on the socio-religious, and occasionally, political sanctions of the time.

The *carita puthis* are mainly colourful versions of the lives of saints; at times, the colour is so intense that not only the correct perspective is distorted, but also the real man about whom a particular *carita puthi* is written is lost in the labyrinth of details and the glazed refulgence emanating out of it. Nevertheless, by a certain judicious application of the principle of rejection and selection, the life of the saint concerned can aptly be re-constructed. The *Katha Gurucarita*, a prose-biography of Sankardeva and Madhav-

deva, is a comprehensive treatise; apart from the light that it throws on the life of the two saints and the socio-religious environment in which they lived and worked, this particular treatise is historically significant, for, its contribution to the evolution of old Assamese prose is considerable. Another significant biography is *Bardowa Gurucarita*. In fact, the 17th and the 18th century constitute the heyday of *carita puthi* literature and *buranji* prose. The first biography to be written in Assamese was *Sankara carita* by Ramacharana Thakura. Other biographies are *Sankardeo-Madhavdeo* by Daityari Thakura, *Sankara carita* by Bhusan Dwija etc. Besides biographies on Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, *carita puthis* on other luminaries of the Vaishnava movement like Gopala Ata, Damodardeva and a few others were also written.

The *carita puthis* register a calculated attempt towards the simplification of Assamese prose, towards endowing it with emotion and lucidity. From this standpoint, it marks a noticeable departure from the metaphysical prose of Bhattadeva on the one hand and the esoteric prose of *mantras* and the matter-of-fact diction of *buranjis* on the other. In *carita puthis*, we find dialogues and descriptions interwoven as the warp and woof of a cohesive pattern; this helps to sustain and sharpen not only the dramatic fervour of the situation delineated, but also create distinctive beauty and elegance of style. The following few lines from the *Katha Guru-carita* are an instance in point:

*Gurujane gai bole viprasava ei jana dhara santi halehe bandhiba pari.
Pache brahmane bole amara ghare pati santi ache, kailai ana haba.
Bole anibaha eikhani, kaba palare Brahmaputrara jala aniba lage,
rolehe patibrata sati....*

The sentence structure in the above passage, use of common familiar words, simplicity of expression, conversational ease etc. are an absorbing evidence of early Assamese prose in its evolutionary process. Even colloquial homely words, not to speak of metaphors and imageries, are filtered through an aesthetically distinctive style. If there are digressions, these are only in thought structure and sequence of incidents, not in the structure of indivi-

dual sentences. The language used in *carita puthis* is a chiselled synthesis of eastern and western Assam spoken words. To conclude, the *carita puthis* are written in the monastic tradition, whether in verse or prose. In language and diction, concept and ideal, they breathe of the sanctified aroma of the *sattrā* (monastery).

(iii) *Historical and other Secular Compositions :*

With the political change ushered in under the auspices of the Ahoms, the cultural and literary tide changed its course from the direction of the Kochas in western Assam to that of the Ahoms in eastern Assam, where they established a kingdom. In keeping with the tradition of Mongoloid people with whom the sense of history is acute, the Ahoms, originally a Thai race, popularised a new type of prose literature known as *buranjis* (historical chronicles); these chronicles contain political records of different ruling dynasties and times. Dr. Grierson in his *Linguistic Survey of India* says thus :

The Assamese are justly proud of their national literature. In no department have they been more successful than in a branch of study in which India, as a rule, is curiously deficient....The historical works or *buranjis*, as they are styled by the Assamese, are numerous and voluminous.

It is astonishing to find that in the whole range of Sanskrit literature which is otherwise so rich and copious in variety, there is, except Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* of the 12th century, no historical work that can be made a mention of. On the other hand, the *buranjis* not only widened the frontiers of old Assamese literature, but also created an interest in secular subjects and made literary style less highflown and sentimental. Thus, it was for the first time that literature showed signs of steadily emerging out of the sombre groves of religion and becoming more matter-of-fact and precise in character.

Dr. S. K. Bhuyan has classified our historical literature into three broad divisions :

(i) Desultory chronicles of the Hindu kings of Kamarupa

from Bhagadatta to the conquest of Assam by the Ahoms, a Shan tribe, in 1228 A.D.

- (ii) Chronicles of the Ahom kings of Assam from 1228 A.D. to the termination of their rule in 1826, continued upto 1838 A.D., or even later, and
- (iii) Chronicles of places other than Assam.

These historical chronicles have come to light so far : *Purani Asama Buranji*, *Asama Buranji*, *Deodhai Asama Buranji*, *Tungkhungia Buranji*, *Kamrupar Buranji*, *Barpahi Buranji*, *Satsari Asama Buranji*, *Chakariphati Buranji*, *Padshaha Buranji* etc. etc. The Ahoms wrote the *buranjis* initially in their own language and it was only subsequently that Assamese came to be used. It is thus that the foundation of a secular political prose was laid in our language.

Speaking of the *buranjis* and their prose style, Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji says :

The result was the development in the Assamese language of a terse and vigorous and withal exceedingly picturesque prose-style for writing history; and neighbouring Bengali and Maithili both were denied the possession of this fine means of expression for several centuries. East Assamese prose as in *buranjis* stands on a very high pedestal when compared with the prose in Early Oriya and in Early Brajbhaka as well as in early Gujarati, early Marathi and early Western Panjabi. The style of the *buranjis* is something quite distinctive and characteristic. It is racy of the soil; it reflects the spoken language of the people, and is always straightforward and direct. It contrasts very favourably with the ornate and florid style of most of the Persian historical works written in India in which, in some at least of the writers, the author is more anxious to flatter some royal patron and to show off his scholarship than to narrate historical events soberly. This certainly has been one of the greatest gifts of the Ahoms to the Indo-Aryan language which they ultimately adopted and in this way they were directly responsible in endowing Assamese with the great glory of a tradition of writing annals and historical anecdotes in beautiful and forceful prose.

The *buranjis* are faithful records of diplomatic and political details *vis-a-vis* historical forces and cross-currents of different times. In the best tradition of historical prose, the language is restrained and marked by a certain elegance of expression; the embellishment it is endowed with is neither rhetorical nor sentimental. The language used in the *buranjis* is eastern Assam speech, polished and chiselled in the climate of court life. It would however be wrong to suppose that these historical narratives were invariably terse in the sense that they were rough-hewn and "mere dry bone". What makes the political prose of these *buranjis* an object of literary elegance and beauty is the judicious use of epithets and imageries, similes and metaphors and clever interfusion of wit and wisdom. The chroniclers of these *buranjis* must be men who possessed an inherent sense of history coupled with an instinctive gift and aptitude for literary effect. From the beginning of the 17th century onwards, it became an age particularly of history and chronicles; this is significant, because it was a change primarily from verse to prose. Although some chronicles were written in verse, whatever poetry they have is not the crucial thing.

Like the *Darang Raja-vamsavali* written in verse by Surjyakhari Daivajna about the kings of Darrang (Sir E. A. Gait puts the date at 1806), the *Padshaha Buranji*, chronicles of the Delhi Badshahate written in prose by Assamese historians, are veritable mines of historical information. The latter chronicles were probably written during the 17th century when Assam experienced invasion after invasion by the Mughals. Unlike the *Purani Asama Buranji* and the *Tungkhungia Buranji* composed in chaste courtly prose of eastern Assam, the language of *Padshaha Buranji* is interspersed with a significant number of Perso-Arabic words like *nikah*, *tamam*, *haramzada*, *haramkhor*, *takid*, *qazi*, *hazurnavis*, *farman* etc., to mention only a few. Through this *Buranji*, a variety was introduced into the existing pattern of old Assamese prose. That there was contact between Assam and the Mughal Indian empire is evident from *Tungkhungia Buranji* also. In Dr. S. K. Bhuyan's edition of this book, there are two exquisite miniature portraits of the Ahom king Siva Singha (1714-1736) and queen Ambikadevi; the queen is

dressed in *muga* silk and the king in "conventional north Indian court costume, the so-called Mughal dress of the 18th century".

Buranji literature reached great height during the 17th century. As evident from epigraphic documents, the influence of Sanskrit from beyond the pre-Ahom era, to be more precise from the Gupta period onward, to the age of Vaishnava literature is distinctive; this continued throughout the medieval period with political power resting in the hands of the Ahoms and the Kochas. It was particularly under the Ahoms, as evident from a close survey of Ahom historical literature, that Sanskrit influence registered a steady decline.

In diplomatic epistles and exchanges with different ruling potentates, Assamese rather than Sanskrit was progressively used. It is seen in the letters exchanged between king Naranarayana of Cooch Behar and king Svarganarayana in 1555 A.D. It was, however, customary to open these diplomatic epistles with a Sanskrit *sloka*; the rest was couched in a formal language that does not show any tangible Sanskrit influence whatsoever. The former says: "*Etha amara kusala tomara kusala nirantara bancha kari*". The other replies: "*Atra kusala tomara kusala bartta suniya parama-pyayita hailo*." In the same way, in land-grant documents, petitions and prayers, census papers and other court documents, prose of a similar style and modulation was used. This style is known for precision and compactness, coherence and measured expression, the virtual characteristics of all political literature. In contrast to Vaishnava prose which was circumscribed by certain dogmas and principles, *buranji* prose was liberated prose, free from all dogma and formal conservatism.

The subject-matter of old Assamese prose presents an exhaustive vista, socio-religious, metaphysical, historical and secular. Under the auspices of the Ahoms, numerous treatises on astronomy, mathematics, cattle diseases, dance technique etc., some in verse and some in prose, were written. They are *Srihasta-muktavali* (on dance technique) by Subhankar Kavi, *Hastividyarnava* (on elephantology) by Sukumar Barkath, *Ghoranidana* (on horses), *Bhasvati* (on astronomy) by Kaviraj Chakravartty, *Kitavat-manjari* (on arithmetic in verse), *Ankara-arjya* (on arithmetic) by Kasinath etc.

From the point of the development of old Assamese prose, the two most significant books are *Hastividyarnava* and *Ghoranidana*. If the *buranjis* are the first political prose in Assamese, these books are the first instances of scientific prose in our literature. The basis of *Hastividyarnava* (1734) is *Gajendra Chintamani* of Sambhunatha; the book is tastefully illustrated with pictures of different kinds of elephants as also of the 18th century Ahom court-life drawn by two painters, Dilbar and Dosai. It enjoys a rich prose tradition as the *buranjis* do; it, however, does not go beyond the vocabulary used in the latter and the style is of an identical flavour. *Hastividyarnava* was written under the behest of king Siva Singha and Queen Ambikadevi; it describes different pedigrees of elephants, their common diseases and the technique of treatment as also the prestige that elephants give to different social classes using them.

The *Ghoranidana* is a treatise on horses. It is doubtful if the Ahoms knew the use of horses as war-material. They must have come to know of horses only after being confronted with successive Muslim invasions of Assam. In 1627, it is said that the Muhammedans invaded Assam with an "army of 10,000 horses and foot soldiers". Judging from the language of the book, a replica of the *buranji* style of prose, *Ghoranidana* must have been written after successive Muhammedan invasions were successfully retarded. *Srihasta-muktavali* is a commentary type of book with Sanskrit *slokas* gathered from different texts on dance and dramaturgy to which Assamese renderings are added. The renderings are elegant and yet simple and lucid. Besides, a prose-work called *Charing Phukanar Buranji* deals not with political facts as such, but with architectural designs and measurements in arithmetical terms. *Bhasvati* by Kaviraj Chakravartty is a prose-work on astronomy. It is not an unusual book for Pragjyotisapura, a land that is described in the *Kalikapurana* thus: "Here Brahma first created the stars and hence the city is called Pragjyotisapura, a city equal to the city of Indra or Sakra."

These books are sufficient to give an adequate insight into the vigorous intellectual life and activity of Ahom times; the sources of these books being mostly Sanskrit, Assamese prose was enriched

with new embellishments, words and syntax. By its very nature, this scientific prose was logical and precise, exact and without any literary flourish of the rhetorical type; the *buranji* prose characterised by similar qualities was its model. The affinity between the two styles is pronounced.

NEW ASSAMESE LITERATURE

THE DECLINING years of Ahom rule, an era of civil strife and feuds, constitute the darkest epoch in the annals of Assam. Repeated invasions of the Burmese reduced what was a mere skeleton into disintegrating bones; the darkest chapter in the catastrophe began when, invited by Badan Barphukan, the Burmese invaded, pillaged and plundered the land under a general called Mingimaha Bandula whose record of atrocity is one of the bloodiest. With the establishment of Pax Britannica, this long-drawn chapter of blood and war came to an end. The Burmese whose sovereignty in the land lasted uninterruptedly from 1819 to 1824 were finally ejected; the population gradually settled down to normal conditions of life as British rule, after the Yandabu Pact of 1826 with the Burmese, consolidated itself. In fact, the Yandabu Pact ended the *regime ancien* politically and the steady intellectual impact ushered in through western education ended it spiritually. The years succeeding British occupation of the land correspond to a turning point in the history of Assamese literature as in that of other Indian literatures. Thus the "splendid isolation", to use H. G. Wells' words, of Indian cultural life, an isolation that started with our medieval times, was broken; as a result of this, our literature came to be enriched with new forms and ideas due to western literary impact, particularly English.

Dr. B. Kakati has pointed out that the modern age in Assamese literature starts from "the beginning of the nineteenth century". In fact, the American Baptist Mission is the torch-bearer of this new literary epoch in our language. With the publication of the New Testament from the Baptist Mission press at Serampore, Bengal, in 1813, the modern period in Assamese literature, strictly speaking, begins; it was translated into Assamese by one Atmaram Sarma of Nowgong. It was an age of struggle for existence for Assamese language and literature. As French displaced the Anglo-Saxon tongue in England when the Duke of Normandy rested there, Bengali that enjoyed the patronage of British rulers in Assam displaced Assamese from the local offices and schools and superimposed itself. Like the Cossacks filling the Czarist army, men from Bengal filled the offices in Assam during British rule. In 1836 Assamese was completely jockeyed out of existence; it was deprived of its legitimate place in the courts of administration and educational institutions. It lost not only its rightful place, but also its initiative to live and grow.

The new landmark in the history of modern Assamese language and literature was provided by two American missionaries : the Rev. N. Brown (1807-1886) and O. T. Cotter. They set foot in the land in 1836. Like Caxton setting his printing press in Westminster, these missionaries set theirs in Sibsagar and with this innovation, the sudden acceleration in the pace of "exchange and preservation of knowledge", to use Rothenstein's words, started. These missionaries made Sibsagar in eastern Assam the centre of their Christian work. Besides the Rev. Brown and Cotter, other zealous missionaries who worked for the cause are M. Bronson, A. H. Danforth, C. Barker, W. M. Ward, Hesselmeyer and A. K. Gurney. To quote Dr. S. K. Bhuyan :

They came to Assam at a time when the older regime was fast disappearing from the view. They brought with them the indomitable spirit of the early New England settlers and their adaptations to new environments as well as their escapades with the aboriginal tribes in whose vicinity they had to

work and preach had their counterpart in the struggles waged by the voyagers of the May Flower and their successors in the land of their adoption.

With a view to popularise the message of Christ, the missionaries thought it essential that the people should be approached through the medium of their own tongue; this they materialised into action within a brief span of barely three months. They produced the first primer for use in schools they established for imparting English education. To the credit of the American Baptist Missionaries, this must be said that they whole-heartedly advocated the use of Assamese in place of Bengali in schools and courts. This is what A. H. Danforth wrote in 1853 :

We might as well think of creating a love of knowledge in the mind of a stupid English boy by attempting to teach him French before he knew anything of the rudiments of English. To my mind this feature of the educational policy pursued in Assam is not only absurd but destructive of the highest motive of education and must necessarily cripple the advancement of the school as well as separate them from the sympathies of the people.

The redemption of the Assamese language in fact came at the hands of the American Baptist Mission who not only gave the language of the people a fresh lease of life, but also gave it a due share of justice and recognition in all their institutions. Forced by irresistible circumstances, Sir George Campbell's Government initiated an enquiry into the claims of the Assamese language for official recognition. In 1853, A. J. Moffat Mills, a Judge of the Calcutta High Court was deputed to prepare an account of Assam; his report was published in 1854. Among other things, it says :

An English youth is not taught Latin until he is well-grounded in English, and in the same manner an Assamese should not be taught a foreign language until he knows his own.

This bore fruit in the ultimate recognition of Assamese as the

official language of the province. But for this, modern Assamese literature would not have been possible, at least its emergence would have been delayed by a good many years and so its progress retarded.

The potent force that helped the American Baptist Missionaries in their campaign of restoring the Assamese language from the morass it was consigned into due to official apathy was Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-1859); he received his education first at the Mission School, established by the Baptist Mission at Sibsagar, and then at the Hindu College, Calcutta, during 1841-1844. He rendered yeoman's service in restoring the Assamese language to the claims of expansion and instruction, and simultaneously with it, attracted the attention of the enlightened few to the benefits of English education.

Under the auspices of the Missionaries, literary growth and movement went hand in hand with linguistic study. The language which the Rev. Brown admired and whose "open agreeable vocalisation, picturesque Sanskrit characters, quaint inflections and idioms became almost native to him" (Mrs. Eliza Brown) stimulated further interest. Like Father Johan Ernst Hans-leden of the Malabar Christian Mission publishing the first modern Sanskrit grammar, N. Robinson of the Baptist Mission published a grammar called *Grammar of the Assamese Language* as early as 1839 from Serampore, Bengal. Besides emphasising the need to study the Assamese language, this grammar had introduced certain innovations in the alphabet.

Dr. N. Brown's *Grammatical Notes on the Assamese Language*, first published in 1843 (the third revised edition was published in 1893) is an instance of painstaking work in grammatical research of the language. Other works of Dr. Brown are translations of some portions of the New Testament, particularly the Gospel portion of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John; all this was done between 1848 and 1854. Mrs. Eliza Brown whose love of the Assamese language was as acute as that of her husband's has to her credit a book of tales for children, a book of arithmetic and another of geography. In this connection, mention may be made of Mrs. Cotter's English-

Assamese book called *Vocabulary and Phrases*, first published in 1840. The Rev. N. Brown's *Grammatical Notes* is a landmark; it was followed by A. R. Dhekial Phukan's *A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language* in 1855. The study of the language was, however, given a sure foundation by Hemchandra Barua (1835-1897) through his grammar called *Asamiya Vyakarana* (1895). It was followed by his monumental Anglo-Assamese dictionary, *Hemkosh* (1900). But for the persistent efforts of Col. Gordon and Hem Goswami (1872-1928), this dictionary possibly would not have seen the light.

The compilation of dictionary engaged the attention also of the American Baptist Mission. Miles Bronson's *Anglo-Assamese Dictionary* is a stupendous work; it contains about 14,000 words. In the preface, the compiler says :

As the language has hitherto no standard and has been used vaguely, like all other first attempts of this kind must be left more or less imperfect. No word however has been allowed to pass without careful examination and when doubts have existed the oldest and the best informed of the people have been consulted.

On the other hand, this must be said that Jaduram Barua is truly the Dr. Johnson of Assam; he was the first to compile a dictionary of our language as early as 1839. He presented it to Col. Johnson who in his own turn gave it to the American Baptist Mission. This must have served as a key to Bronson's *Assamese-English Dictionary*, a solid landmark of scholarship and industry.

The Rev. Brown made certain other attempts that produced a far-reaching impact on our literature towards preservation and publication of old manuscripts. The publication of such classics as Bakul Kayastha's *Kitabat-manjari* in 1845, besides the collection of about forty old Assamese manuscripts between 1840 and 1850, stimulated antiquarian interest. The interest thus stimulated led to the enthusiastic publication a few years later of books like Sankardeva's *Kirtan-Ghosa* in 1876, the Assamese version of the Ramayana and a few other manuscripts by patriotic men like Haribilash Agarwalla (1842-1931), and Madhav Bardoloi, only

to mention a few. Agarwalla also published a few cantos of Sankardeva's *Bhagavata*, *Rama vijaya nata*, *Gunamala*, *Bhatima*, *Bhakti Ratnavali*, besides a few of his *Bargitas* and Daityari's and Ramchandra's *Guru caritas*. Madhav Bardoloi published the seven-canto *Ramayana* and *Dipika-Chandra* in 1895. Kaliram Barua published *Kirtan Dasama* and *Gita-Govinda*.

The Baptist Mission did their best to make literature accessible to all. In 1846, this missionary organisation founded a monthly journal called *Oronodoi* (1846-1882). The printing press and the academic institutions established by the Baptist Mission brought within the reach of the people the light of western science, literature and culture; under this new inspiration a group of writers in the vernacular emerged, and books, pamphlets and periodicals in Assamese came to be registered. Missionary work that was necessarily stimulated by Christian piety inspired no doubt some original writers like Nidhi Levi Farwell (b 1827); Farwell's poem *Binoi vachan*, more didactic than lyrical, is an interesting study both from the point of diction and Christian literary trend. To be precise, this poem is Vaishnava in aesthetics and Christian in theological diction. His other poems like *Nistarar upai*, *Christar avatar bibaran* etc. similarly partake of the essence of Biblical sermon or paraphrase rather than herald a new poetical trend; he is credited with a few prose essays also on subjects of law, science and history. It is said that Farwell who was the first Assamese to be converted to Christianity was principally associated with the compilation of Bronson's dictionary.

Oronodoi, the mouthpiece of Baptist society, was an "Oriental replica" of an illustrated London paper; the pages of the journal were decorated with woodcuts engraved by indigenous artists. The subjects that found expression in this journal are both religious and secular. P. H. Moor of the Baptist Mission wrote thus in 1907 :

Modern literature whether Christian or non-Christian is the product of the last sixty years of the nineteenth century.

Once interest was stimulated through the *Oronodoi*, there grew

a number of journals and periodicals, each one of which has left a distinct mark on modern Assamese literature. *Asam Bandhu* (1885-86) was published from Calcutta with Gunabhiram Barua (1837-94) as editor. *Assam News*, an Anglo-Assamese journal, was published from Gauhati in 1882 with H. C. Barua as editor. With its well-written prose and verse, this journal may be described as the authentic precursor of the *Jonaki* (1889). It was through this journal that the spelling of Assamese words was standardised and an authentic style formulated. The *Asam Bandhu* contained many thought-provoking articles, literary and historical, and thus helped to widen man's intellectual vision. Other journals published during the eighties of the last century are *Asam Bilashini* (1871-83), *Mau* (1886), *Asam Tara* (1888-90) and *Lorabandhu* (1888).

Vaishnava literary trends stretched far down into this late period *i.e.* the age of transition prior to western literary tendencies making themselves clearly felt. Raghudev Goswami wrote his *Hitopadesi kavya* in the old epic style round a parable of the animal world; it is mock-heroic in spirit. Lalit Goswami, a follower of Bengal Vaishnavism initiated by Chaitanyadeva (1485-1533), translated into Assamese in 1875 a Sanskrit *kavya* by Gopalobhatta Goswami that contains lurid descriptions of Lord Krishna's amorous dalliance. Classical in content and technique, this poem is known as *Sri Keli Rahashya*. Surjyakhari Daivajna preserved till the opening decade of the 20th century the Vaishnava thematic tradition of poetry as manifest in his adaptations from the Mahabharata.

Visheswar Vaidadhip is the author of a metrical chronicle called *Belimarar Buranji* written under the inspiration of *Ahom padya Buranjis*; it was probably composed between 1838 and 1846. It contains a vivid account of the changing aspects of life, events and incidents in Assam between 1788 and 1819. The language of the poem has easy rhythm and the similes are remarkably original; the central *motif* of the poem is impermanence of all things in the manner of Vaishnava ethical tenets. Besides making an extensive use of Vaishnava traditional metres, Vaidadhip has introduced some other metres also like *muktavali*, *bidagdha lechari* etc. *Purandarar patni sakalar bilap* in *muktavali* metre and *Chandra-*

kantar babe puranarir bilap in *bidagdha lechhari* are new directions in our metrical history. Though definitely archaic, Dharmakanta Buragohain's *Gowahatir bibaran* like Vaidadhip's *Rangpur nagarar barnana* is rich in descriptive imageries. Mostly conventional in form, they belong in spirit to the old tradition. Others who have reflected the *Oronodoi* tradition in particular are Balaram Phukan, Kinaram Sattria and Govindaram Bhuyan.

Surjyakhari Daivajna has maintained the traditional *buranji* art in his metrical chronicle *Darang Raja-vamsavali* (1806). In poetic diction, it is neither as rich or enervating as Vaidadhip's *Belimarar Buranji* or Dutiram Hazarika's (1805-1901) *Kali Bharat* (1862); Though the theme is historical, the inspiration deduced is from Vaishnava classical poetry; it narrates events between the years of 1679 and 1858. Hazarika never employed archaic forms or words to create an atmosphere of history.

Other poets of this transition period are Gopinath Chakravartty and Purnakanta Sarma. Although inspired by a similar Vaishnava classical spirit, Chakravartty is not as finished an artist as Raghudev Goswami. Mythological in purport, his *Kalanka bhanjana* possesses a touch of what may be called "wholesome rusticity"; and although the tone of the poem is often stern and archaic, it grows passionate in the recital of tender themes. Purnakanta Sarma's *Nala charit* (1889) describes the mythopoetic life of Nala and his tragic experiences. With episodes, descriptions and similes borrowed from the classical storehouse, Sarma represents the culmination of the first phase of transition of our modern literary period. Broadly speaking, this age of transition may be described like the Augustan age in English literature as an age of pseudo-classicism.

The opening years of British rule that constitute the second phase of transition in our literature are barren of the agonies of a re-birth, its conflict and restlessness, and whatever impact of western literary trends the age experienced was not direct; it was Anglo-Bengali in inspiration. The publication of the *Jonaki* (1889), a monthly magazine from Calcutta by a group of Assamese students there, gave in a sense the real momentum to Assamese

literature after the spell of fadeout it suffered in the post-Ahom transition period. Though short-lived, this journal marked a rapid growth of literary culture to be followed by the *Bijoli* in 1890, *Banhi* in 1909 and *Chetona* in 1919. It was a period of great interest and inspiration; the influx of ideas due to contact with western literary trends revolutionised the existing methods. A wave of literary upheaval, optimism and newness of form and technique had arisen as a result. In fact, the *Oronodoi* and the *Jonaki* that effected great changes in our literary trends and technique are the two milestones of modern Assamese literature.

With the poets writing in the *Oronodoi* tradition, the first phase of transition ends; the second phase arose and continued to reflect tendencies that could not be defined as typical of the new spirit that was soon to follow. The period of Assamese literature subsequent to it was romantic in content, spirit and inspiration. Though the new age marked a reaction against the tradition of the classical age, it would be wrong to describe it as mere reaction; this response contained in its womb "winged seeds" of a new development. Although they could not completely identify themselves with the mainstream, the writers of the second phase of transition nevertheless aided the process. The sun of new inspiration so far as these transitional writers are concerned showed itself only on the rim of the horizon, and that too not in clear outlines. In between these stages, however, was heralded the romantic age, and although the classical note was not wholly absent, the dissolution of the compromise of the past became imperative under western literary impact.

Ratneswar Mahanta's (1864-93) prose and verse compositions appeared in the *Asam Bandhu* (1885-86) and *Jonaki* (1889). His collection of poems is *Kavitar har*. Written in the romantic tradition of the commonplace, Mahanta's *Gawalia bowari* is a poetical picture of dedication and endeavour, that of a daughter-in-law, an image of health and virtue seen against the background of her daily household routine. Though the poets of the transition period very often than not borrowed episodes and similes from Vaishnava poets, *Gawalia bowari* is a marked departure as com-

pared with D. K. Buragohain's *Gowahatir bibaran* for instance, published in the 1853 June issue of the *Oronodoi*. The concluding lines of the poem are in the manner of a didactic exhortation; nevertheless, its thought and imagery are neatly trimmed. Mahanta's *Asomat Man*, published in the *Jonaki*, gives an evidence of the new historical-cum-political prose.

Baladev Mahanta (1850-95), teacher in an elementary school, is a poet of "memorable verses"; in 1884 was published his *Ujupath*. The poems are easy and lucid, the imageries are free from the usual learned influences of the preceding era. Epigrammatic in some of its lines, his poem *Kauri aru sial* is an exceedingly popular piece. If simplicity and rapidity of movement constitute the essence of the new poetry, poems like *Kauri aru sial*, despite their moralistic tone, register a significant progress towards that end.

Balinarayan Bora, editor and publisher of a journal called *Mau* (1886) like Goldsmith's *Bee*, focussed his attention on the social conditions of the time. He wrote satires in the main, the tone of which was neither personal nor occasional or whimsical. Bora's poems like *Dangaria* and *Asamiya babu* that lampoon the new Anglo-Assamese crudity are the first satiric poems of our modern literature; they paved the way for verse-satirists like Mitraddev Mahanta (b 1895) and Dandi Kalita (1890-1955) of the subsequent period to whom goes the credit of raising satire, a "debunking art", to dignity. The impact of Anglo-Bengali influences, British administrators and European tea-planters created a new social class called *babus* by providing this spurious growth with clerical jobs in their offices; *Asamiya babu* satirises the queer tendencies of this new malignant social growth in a merciless, though not savage, manner. In *Dangaria*, the piquancy of the situation is brought out through individual incongruities. Though the note is light-hearted, the purpose of both the poems is deeply serious.

Durgaprasad Majumdar-Barua (1870-1928) published his *Uju kavita* in 1895, *Lora kavita* and *Phul* in 1899. Though not of the nature of a parable like those of Baladev Mahanta's, these poems are remarkable for their easy flow and simplicity. Mafizuddin Ahmed Hazarika's (1870-1958) *Jnanmalini* was published

in 1897. Ahmed's poetry is illustrative of a spirit that creates by quiet contact with the commonplace experiences of life a stimulated philosophy. The simple idea that he expresses in *Munichuni beli* is expanded into a level of philosophy in *Dinkana*. In it, through the symbol of a blind man who struts and frets aimlessly, the poet universalises the nature of human life tossed about in this universe of illusions. The spirit of this poem is more homely than the avowed homeliness of most poets of the Wordsworthian tradition in our language. Ahmed has earned the maximum of praise with the minimum of creative work to his credit. Promod Barthakur and Suleiman Khan have to their credit children's verses, *Kavita kusum* and *Kavitaputhi* respectively. With their inherent tenderness, lucidity and easy graceful thought, what these children's verses achieved was the promotion of sincere and simple susceptibilities that constitutes the quintessence of romanticism.

Benudhar Rajkhowa (1872-1955) edited the *Bijoli* (1890-92) in its third year of existence at Calcutta. Besides *Chandra sambhav kavya*, an epic, he is also the author of a number of poems and songs; in a sense, he is our pioneer song-maker. In between 1920 and 1930 he published a number of poems like *Dehar pralay*, *Jivan sandhiya*, *Sipurir batari* etc., all serious verse. Rajkhowa's poems are known for their historical significance rather than for their artistic merit. Perhaps it is because of this that time has cruelly relegated him and his work to the background, if not into oblivion. Nevertheless, these songs like most other compositions of this transition period are precursors in a sense of the dawn-songs of the succeeding romantic period.

Bholanath Das (1858-1929) and Ramakanta Chaudhury (1846-1889) are pioneers in the sense that they discarded the conventional forms of the transition poets and adopted the blankverse initiated in contemporary Bengali literature by Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873). To Das and Chaudhury goes the credit of introducing this new instrument into our poetical orchestra and helping to revive and re-create its music by enlarging the compass. Though the theme of Chaudhury's blankverse epic *Abhimanyu vadk* is taken from the Mahabharata, the *kavya* reveals influences

of a new technique. The poem shows originality and the power to utilise natural expression in the new verse-form. Chaudhury has two mythological dramas to his credit, *Sita haran* and *Ravan vadh*.

Bholanath Das's poetical fame rests on his blankverse epic, *Sita haran* (1888) and collection of poems *Kavita-mala*, published in two parts, one in 1882 and the other in 1883. Subsequently, another collection of his poems *Chintatarangini* was published in 1884. Though mostly outlandish in jargon, *Sita haran kavya* is noted for its vigorously sustained movement; the formality of style adds dignity to its descriptive fervour. Though words of an alien origin like *bitopi*, *brika dhurta*, *bayosha* etc. are used, the beauty of this narrative poem lies in the fact that these words, however alien, are submerged in the context of a powerful narration.

The greatest contribution of the succeeding age is the innovation of the lyric as a distinct class of poetry; the lyric appeared for the first time in Das's *Kavita-mala* and *Chintatarangini* collections of poems. Of them, *Megh* and *Kiwanu nagage amar mon* show certain departure from tradition. In the nature-lyric *Megh*, the poet reveals in the Wordsworthian sense the extent to which a simple object of nature could be clothed with beauty and imaginative insight, and yet, the poem lacks in freshness because of its elaborate classical diction. Nevertheless, this poem, noted for its picturesque emotionality, ushers nature as a theme for treatment to be echoed more deeply by subsequent nature-poets like Raghu Chaudhury (b. 1879).

In blankverse, it is the form that gives freedom and rescues an unrhymed measure from drifting into that which is nearer to bad prose than to good verse. The innovators of blankverse in Assamese, Das and Chaudhury, drew their inspiration from Madhusudan Dutt, who in his turn drew his from Milton. Although his subjects were drawn mostly from classical sources like Kirtibasa's *Ramayana*, Dutt, who knew western literature, both English and Greek, used blankverse with poise and dignity. On the otherhand, Bholanath Das's blankverse could not rise above the level of imitation and that is why his *Sita haran kavya*, technically speaking, produces a staccato effect, despite the fact that there

are in the poem occasional lines of tangent hues reflecting a sepiate radiance. Chaudhury's *Abhimanyu vadh kavya* is technically more developed.

These modern blankverse *kavyas* exploiting mythological themes produced a deep impression on the contemporaries of Das and Chaudhury. Due to contact with western epic-poetry as also with Vaishnava mythological poetry, the conventional need for something grand and magnificent still held good in the new age; whatever the subject-matter, epical *kavyas* generally subserve this purpose. While the lyric was vaguely supposed to be of ephemeral interest, the epic was considered to be otherwise; many poets, because of this, nourished a secret preference for the epic till the recent past.

Hiteswar Barbarua (1876-1939) has to his credit two collections of sonnets, *Malach* (1918) and *Chakulo* (1922) and several *kavyas* like *Kamatapur dhamsa* (1899), *Birahini bilap* (1896), *Tirotar atmadan* (1908), *Mulagabharu* (1915), *Desdemona* (1917) etc. While Das and Chaudhury employed blankverse for mythological and P. N. Gohain-Barua for personal themes, Barbarua utilised it principally for historical subject-matter. Barbarua often shows an attachment for chiselled homely words, but not without tangible detriment to the epic elegance of his *kavyas*. His life was darkened by successive tragic incidents, loss of two sons, one in 1910 and another in 1921 and his wife in 1912, and that is why we hear undertones of sadness in most of his later-day compositions. *Pranar Jiten* is personal in tone, an echo of a soul smothered with grief. Though the natural organ note of blankverse music is often missing from his verse, it has a certain measure of flexibility and caressing tenderness. Another thing must be said : the invocation to the Muses is an epic convention. Like Milton invoking the Muses or Ovid the gods to inspire "the verse unbroken", P. N. Gohain-Barua invokes the Muse of sacred song, Bagdevi, to inspire his poetic eloquence.

P. N. Gohain-Barua (1871-1946) has to his credit a blankverse epic *Lila* (1901), written in the manner of a personal elegy on the premature death of his wife. The poem however failed to take

wings, and even as an elegy, it is crippled. Gohain-Barua's passport to Parnassus is however assured by some of the lyrics in his collection, *Jurani* (1900). The lyric *Gohat* presents a contrast between the society of man and the solitude of nature. The religion of man, corrupted by vague mortal desires, is base and sordid whereas that of nature is pure and ennobling. In *Kartabya*, plants and creepers sing with the sparkling sunrays in praise of the Supreme Being; it is the message of duty as enjoined in the *Gita*. The rest of the *Jurani* poems are mostly bereft of colour and vision, insight and glow, qualities that give to lyric poetry grace and beauty, passion and feeling.

The tone of the age was so preponderatingly poetical that even men famed as essayists, novelists and historians also flirted with the Muses. Radha Phukan, Satya Bora, K. L. Barua and Rajani Bardoloi, all tried their hands at poetical compositions without any tangible success whatsoever. Despite the so-called newness of themes, the inspiration of these poets was not far removed from the didactic writers of the preceding era. Whatever sublimation they sought to impart to their reflections on life or nature produced only a barren staccato effect; their emotions were not deeply felt.

Kamalakanta Bhattacharjya (1853-1937), a poet of the *Oronodoi* age, spanned the 19th with the 20th century; his first volume of poems *Chintanal* appeared in 1890 and the last *Chintatarangini* in 1933. Bhattacharjya is of the transition, and yet outside it. Judging from his extensive literary life, it is difficult to pin him down to a particular period of literary development. But then, that he succeeded in revolutionising poetic diction at a time when the language of poetry was mainly a compound of conceits cannot be denied. No matter what he wrote, patriotism was a burning passion with Bhattacharjya, the deepest roots of which were embedded according to him in the old traditions of our culture and history. He was a faithful transcriber of social problems whose study of life and society was based on one exclusive principle, the principle of solitary search for truth. Besides *Rangpur* and *Sibsagar darshan*, partly for its subject-matter and partly for its forceful

direct style, *Kuwa paharani* is one of Bhattacharjya's most popular poems. The love of patriotic ideals, local in *Chintanal*, assumes largely a universal note in *Chintatarangini*. The west first enamoured and then repulsed when the country's subjection and the consequent destruction of national values was brought into focus by thinking men of the time. Bhattacharjya is poetically in that nationalistic springtide.

Despite the varied influences that affected his poetic career, extending over half a century or so, Bhattacharjya's works reveal few romantic tendencies, except the romanticism of patriotic passion. Precisely speaking, most of his poems resemble carefully developed symphonies upon various moods and their success depends not so much on the harmony produced, but on their rugged simplicity and emotional appeal, patriotic at its best. His most well-known prose-work is *Kah pantha* (1934).

Broadly speaking, the medium of expression of the transition period, barring a few exceptions, was a compound of mannerisms, archaisms and conceits; it was an era of positive triviality. Yet, of the literary revival that followed, there is no denying the fact that K. K. Bhattacharjya was its poetic herald. In all irreverence of form or idiom, he utilised a lucidly direct phraseology whether writing in suave dignity as in *Jatiya gaurov* or plainly and easily as in *Paharani*. Of all the poets of the transition on the eve of the romantic revival of the subsequent era, Bhattacharjya stands supreme as a man who with his fine sensibility and sense of balance harmonised the era of *Oronodoi* with the epoch of *Jonaki*. Although like Wordsworth who often exaggerated simplicity until it degenerated into imbecility, he too, occasionally lapsed from plain speaking into luridness, Bhattacharjya in the true Chaucerean manner stretched out both his hands, the left into the past and the right into the future and so laid the foundation of a new epoch that manifested itself, to use Tagore's words, in the "language of picture and music".

western influences

THE HISTORY of modern Assamese literature is the history of a new growth under the impact of western literature and education. In fact, all modern Indian regional literatures have drawn a rich fund of inspiration from foreign lands, particularly England. Mr. Latif and Mr. P. R. Sen have shown how modern Urdu and Bengali literature have evolved a new idiom under the impact of western literature. Modern literature has become more human and less divine and religio-ethical in inspiration. When we speak of Assamese literature in general, we consider it as almost homogenous consisting of intertwining traditions and tendencies. But with the introduction of western literary influences, however, there has been a conscious dissolution of the compromise of the past. In brief, the temper of the new age may be described as poetical and philosophic, human and imbued with a new creative passion. The literature of the present is *ipso facto* free in style, thought and form; its discipline is assured by a "peculiar creative faculty", to use Benedetto Croce's words.

During the years bridging the *Oronodoi* (1846) and the *Jonaki* (1889), western literary influences did not have any direct impact as in the subsequent years. It was felt and realised through the influence of Bengali, and it was through this alien contact that the magnetic charge of familiarising the people with western litera-

ture was conducted; naturally, the influence was chequered. With the ultimate restoration of Assamese and publication of the *Jonaki* from Calcutta, direct contact was accelerated. Like the *Banga darshan* (1882) of Bengal with Bankim Chatterjee at its helm, the *Jonaki* with Chandrakumar Agarwalla as its editor produced an ever-widening effect. Krishnaprasad Agarwalla's poem *Jonaki* published in the first issue of this journal is significant of the new literary trend it was destined to create and promote. The latter part of the 19th century was an era of unequalled enthusiasm for Assam; it was a period of great interest and inspiration. The influx of new ideas due to contact with western literature gave our literature of this period a new evolutionary stamina and standard. This was a dynamic epoch; it was under its auspices that literature came to be humanised and a tangible harmony in language emerged in the place of conflicting transitional trends.

With the emancipation of literature from the intellectual and religious discipline of the Vaishnava era, there has been inevitably a widening of the literary frontier. The new drama of the type of *Bhrama ranga* (1888), translation of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, ousted the old *nataka*. While the Vaishnava drama was principally a one-Act piece, the modern drama experienced a new technical development; it came to be planned into "Acts" and "scenes". Old technical devices of the type of *sutradhara* who acted like the Greek chorus on stage were ultimately discarded and other devices like "asides" and "soliloquies" with a view to give a concerted effect to the dramatic story were introduced. According to Sanskrit aesthetics, tragedy was an anathema on the stage and certain scenes like eating or fighting were prohibited. Except a few minor deviations, our Vaishnava *ankiya natas* followed these rules of Sanskrit aesthetic discipline to a considerable extent. Under western impact, tragedy was ushered into our literature as a new drama form; the tragic hero as such is a new addition to our *dramatis personae*. Although none of the tragic heroes of our drama has risen to any great height, the inspiration drawn is inevitably from Shakespeare and Seneca. Goodness

and piety, usual Indian characteristics, do not generally contribute to tragic intensity needed for the theatre.

Judging from Shakespearean tragic heroes, the quality essential is tragic virtue and certain tortuous complexity of character, capable of producing dramatic conflict in a big way. Even tragic women characters should possess these qualities as Lady Macbeth or Cleopatra possessed. Women of the type of Portia or Calpurnia, because they do not possess these virtues, are tragically pale and unimportant. Whatever this may be, that our modern drama is modelled on the western prototype is a historical fact. In recent times, the influence has further widened, embracing different techniques initiated by Ibsen, O'Neill and other great playwrights of the western world. Another technique that has influenced our drama particularly is the three basic Aristotelean "unities", including the unity of plot and action, as understood by the Italian critics of the Renaissance or later by the French classicists of the 19th century.

Further, there had been a rapid introduction of new forms of literature under western inspiration, particularly short story, novel and essay. Technically, the short story is a departure from existing folk-tales where fantasy played a dominant role, thus eliminating the human element from its canvas. The modern short story has shown variety and vision, apart from technical development and depth of subject-matter. Beginning with L. N. Bezbarua (1868-1938) and Sarat Goswami (1884-1944), the short story in our language has established itself in variety and potentiality of technique and subject-matter. Two broad trends in our later-day stories are evident, one of Maupassant and the other of Chekov, besides the influences of others like Somerset Maugham and Katherine Mansfield in particular.

Old fiction literature was primarily in verse; they are the *kavyas* describing mythical, super-normal incidents of a mythopoetic world where imagination of an abundant character rather than down-to-earth reality played a dominant role. Modern complexities of life are antagonistic to moribund flights of imagination. The romantic novel with a social setting that idealises and outlines

the hero as a vapid individual became fashionable for some time in our literature; it is a dying phase now. Under the inspiration of western aesthetics, there is today very little of that fatal division between life and literature; the study of Marxian dialectics has given an edge to it. Apart from Freudian and Jungian psychology, conflicting literary intentions under western creative auspices, each dynamic in its own way, have come to stimulate the sinews of thought and form of our literature into meaningful creations. To be brief, time that is neither neutral nor non-aligned by its very nature has its own contributions to make and our literature has adjusted itself significantly to this process.

The essay, both informal and serious, is a western innovation; introduced under the auspices of the *Jonaki*, it has come to become a potential instrument of dissertation, both for literary and non-literary purposes. Through our essays on historical subjects, a new analytical process of study and dissertation has emerged, an avenue in which men like Dr. S. K. Bhuyan and Benu Sarma have made a mark. Similarly, under its auspices, literary criticism, entirely a new development in our literature, has grown; it has contributed to the widening of literary subject-matter on the one hand and intensification of aesthetic study on the other. The scope of the critical essay is further extended to embrace a wider avenue of expression from metaphysics and psychology to science and technology. The best example of the informal essay is L. N. Bezbarua's (1868-1938), written in the Pickwickian manner; it has further been developed by the later generation into *belles lettres* of the Chestertonian type.

This must be said that the modern age in Assamese literature is essentially an age of poetry; no other avenue of literature has stimulated as much interest and study as this. Both from the point of technique and subject-matter, western impact on it is the deepest. The history of modern Assamese literature like that of other Indian literatures is not an experiment in evolution, an indigenous process, but an accelerated drift from one extreme to another made possible by western education and its aesthetic impact. The most tangible result of it is the growth of the lyric as a class by itself. The epic

often of old Vaishnava type, flamboyant in concept and technique, lingered on until it was completely obliterated by the emergence of the lyric into emotionally potential outline. With the romantic lyricists, the aim emphasised was intensity, and unlike Vaishnava *kavyas* that deal with characters and events outside man's experience, the lyric in the modern sense, to use the words of Sharp, is "vivid expression of personal experience". True it is that lyrical strains are often evident in Vaishnava narrative poems also, but the lyric as a distinct class of poetry, each poem turning, as Palgrave says, "on some single thought, feeling or situation" did not develop. Lyricism may be compared to a delicate song-bird that loses all its spontaneity of expression under rigid discipline; it is antithetical to restraint.

It is said that the lyric is a general term for all poetry susceptible of being sung to the accompaniment of a musical instrument. Taken in this sense, our folk-songs like the *Bihugits* and *Bongits* are truly lyrical in essence like the songs of Ovid and Theocritus. Emotionally these songs of our folk-poets must have helped our modern lyric poetry that grew under western inspiration. But, we must not forget that the lyric is something more than a song; all musical compositions are not lyric poetry. For instance, although they are music, poetry and religion combined into a single frame, our *Bargitas*, Vaishnava hymn-songs, are not lyrics in the strict modern sense. Hegel insists that it is the personal thought, passion or emotion as also the metrical form that defines a lyric. The modern age of Assamese poetry is an era that synchronises with an all-round development of the lyric.

The principal characteristics of the romantic movement are: return to nature, personal love, interest in the supernatural and medieval legends, sympathetic treatment of the commonplace, revolt against conventions, experimentation with new metres etc. Under romantic inspiration, the personal theme in poetry grew. Modern lyric compositions are in a sense lyric confessions. With the advent of the personal note in poetry, there has been a rapid growth of love-poems in our literature. It is Rousseau who is the progenitor of the cult of passion for passion's sake and it is the

romantic poets of France and England who following him transformed this grand passion from what it had been in the medieval age, passion for "demoniac possession", to use Aldous Huxley's words, into a divine ecstasy. For instance, love in the medieval romance, though virginal, is gross physical passion unredeemed by any mystic romantic emotion.

On the other hand, love, according to romanticists, is an ideal passion, an emotion that often transcends sense-appeal. Bertrand Russell points out that the essential of romantic love consists in the idea that regards the beloved as very precious and difficult to possess. Romantic love, under western literary inspiration, particularly that of Shelley, has come to be treated as an ideal subject for poetry in our modern literature. The other aspect of love which, according to Alexis Carrel, stimulates the mind when it does not attain its object also finds an exhilarating expression in some of our songs, particularly of Jatin Duara and Gonesh Gogoi. Speaking of the "delicate creations" of love, Andre Maurois says: "The truth is that love existing already in the soul seeks a suitable object and if it does not find one thus creates it." Romantic poets, princes of imagination, are easily susceptible to this sort of thirst for love and beauty.

To sum up: if Petrarch who is said to be the first great poet since the days of ancient Rome to write love-songs in the "language that men talk", as an Italian critic has pointed out, furnished models for Shelley and other love-poets of the time, our Vaishnava poet-singers like Suradas, Vidyapati, Vilvamangal as also our folk-songs with their inherent lyricism must have served as source of inspiration for our romantic poets, at least in thought and feelings; this has ultimately been re-inforced and stabilised into a tendency under western literary impact.

What the modern Assamese poets did under the inspiration of western poetry was to idealise passion in the manner of simple peasant-singers. L. N. Bezbarua's *Malati* and *Pharing premikar jui*, Hem Goswami's *Priyatamar chithi* and *Kako aru hiya nibilao*, C. K. Agarwalla's *Madhuri* etc. reveal romantic possibilities of poems composed in a simple and unsophisticated style. Precisely

speaking, our romantic love-poetry has become a song like the Elizabethan love-lyrics "to the mistress's eye-brow", to use Caudwell's words. The beloved is pictured as too precious for "human nature's daily food"; the lover's heart burns with the "desire of the moth for the star". This is the prevailing spirit of the romantic poetry of the age. Besides the introduction of the blankverse and the sonnet, there has also been, with the widening of art-avenue and subject-matter, a corresponding rejuvenation and variety of verse music, newness of metrical technique and verse form in this period of our literature.

The emancipation of imagination from conventional Vaishnava literary ideal is an outstanding achievement of modern Assamese poetry. With the romanticists, imagination is free and subservient only to poetic impulses, moods of excitement and emotion. Under western inspiration, imagination is extended to invest commonplace objects of life and nature with a vision of art. This vision of art, the power to transmute ordinary things into objects of perennial beauty, is one of the most precious possessions of our new poetry. At the initial stage, this enthusiasm for commonplace objects went to such disproportionate extent that even poems on printing presses, *e.g.*, Dayaram Chetia's *Chapakhanar bibaran* and others like *Manimuni sak* by Bhairav Khataniar were written. Though stilted in emotion and expression, these poems show the extent to which the new inspiration permeated. Thus under western inspiration, the attention of poets was drawn away from esoteric philosophy to simple objects of nature and life. Naturally, there has been a considerable widening in the range of subject-matter and intellectual perception and emotional responses.

The attitude of poets had undergone a change from nature as decorative symbol for literature to one that vibrates with an impulse of life and communes spiritually and emotionally with man. It would be wrong to say that nature did not feature in our old poetry whether of the Vaishnava era or of the era earlier to that. Possibly this earlier absorption in nature prepared the ground for the upsurge of modern nature-poetry; the wholesome impact of Rousseauite philosophy and English poetry must have

completed this process of sympathetic interest in nature for her own sake. It is true that there is fine description of nature in Sankardeva's poetry also, but it is not poetry for the sake of nature alone. Nature to classical poets like Sankardeva was a scenic back-drop against which the mythopoetic drama of life, as conceived by them, unfolded; to them, nature was merely an emblem, a parable, a simile, in short an anthology of poetic objects without any fundamental unity or significance underlying them. Our modern poets' acquaintance with English poets like Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats and Byron inspired their poetry with the Rousseauite idea that nature is dead unless animated by fires of love; this awakened in them the desire for beauty as a hand awakens the sleeping music of a harp. Their attitude towards nature became pantheistic, inspired by an idea of subtle mystic relation between man and nature *i.e.* a sort of semi-mystical faith in the goodness of nature. The difference in attitude between the two sets of thought can be illustrated by a comparison of the simple and soulful nature pictures of Raghu Chaudhury of the modern times with the stately but artificial grandeur of nature-descriptions to be found in Sankardeva's *Haramohan* for instance.

Different romantic elements standardised by Rousseau's philosophy, arcadian longing, pursuit of the dream-woman, aspiration for the infinite etc., had crystallised steadily into our modern poetry. Besides love-lyrics and nature-lyrics, there has been the growth of a new poetry of mysticism. With Nalini Devi (*b.* 1898), a mystic poet *par excellence*, romanticism expresses a restless state of the deeper life of the soul, a poetry of intuitive flights, soaring with tranquil and serene certitude into the realm of the absolute. With A. G. Rai-Chaudhury, it is spiritual and mystic absorption in the infinite, realised through sense-perception. The ideology of western romantic poetry had revived mysticism already constituting the life-spring of our eastern philosophy.

For mystic ideal, the Indian poet did not have to seek inspiration from foreign sources. That there is a transcendental "beyond" outside the limits of the visible universe, an unseen world-manifestation, that there is a spiritual pining of the human soul for the

Supreme Truth, that ours is the land of Nachiketa whom even Yama's wealth could not beguile, all these mystic ideals are basic with our culture and philosophy. Another metaphysical idea that inspired our poets of this particular age is *mayavada*, an integral part of Shankaracharya's Vedanta which holds that the universe is an apparition, an appearance. The universe is an illusion : our life is a momentary halt on the journey of the infinite; the *Gita* teaches us that the creation is a divine action. The songs of our saint-poets like Sankardeva and Madhavdeva added intensity to these basic mystic concepts, *mayavada* and the law of cosmic *karma*; the inspiration continued and encouraged a temper for creative responses of a mystic type in our modern poetry.

In our romantic poetry under western literary impact, the passions of the individual, the commonplace objects of life and nature are given distinct poetic and mystic representation. Barring a few occasional references to love of humanity or man as such, our medieval literature, despite its religio-ethical bias, is sterile so far as the poetry of man is concerned. Whatever reference to man was there is Platonic or metaphysical, ethereal or doctrinaire. What the writings of Voltaire and Rousseau achieved was an enthusiasm for man as man; this, often idealised to a point of emotional intensity, has found an eloquent expression in western romantic poetry. This literary ideal has inspired the poetry of man in our romantic literature, an idealised concept of certain transcendental absorption, re-inforced by our philosophy and old metaphysical literature; the contribution made to it by the transcendental movement from Kant to Hegel is significant. Besides, what the French philosopher Auguste Comte preached,—the only positive faith, faith in a God of whom we are certain was the worship of humanity and while humanity in the concrete was present before us, it was useless to seek after strange gods,—also influenced our poetry of man to a certain extent. Nurtured in the metaphysics of Sankardeva and Oriental ethics, poets like Chandra-kumar Agarwalla (1867-1938) readily responded to this inspiration. His *Manav-bandana* reflects this philosophy.

The impact of western romantic poetry has revitalised and

popularised patriotism as a poetic theme for our literature. Besides, there were objective conditions on a national scale to give it an edge. Whether in poetry or prose essay, the interest in history as a patriotic theme came definitely with the age of romanticism. To these writers, matter was not subordinated to idea, and yet then, history to them was not a pageant on a Chinese scroll; it was a living entity. If the ideas and passions of the French Revolution enflamed patriotism in western romantic literature, particularly in the poetry of Italy, Germany and England, the subjection of our country and a consequent pride in our cultural heritage had provided the necessary emotive impulse to our patriotic literature. England had provided the political conditions for it and English literature its form and technique. Literature is crystallisation of tendencies of thoughts of a particular age. In our history, this was an age of social unrest and political enthusiasm; into every phase of this national upsurge, poets and writers entered to celebrate and report. To quote Dr. Aronson: "At one time or another, every contemporary poet comes in contact with political forces; frequently also he cannot avoid taking an active part in the political life of his own country." Of our patriotic poets, the most outstanding are K. K. Bhattacharjya (1853-1936), L. N. Bezbarua (1868-1938) and A. G. Rai-Chaudhury (b. 1885).

This note of revolutionary patriotism at times diversified itself into different forms, one being the verse satire. In its social associations, the satire sets out to correct manners by laughter. Though apparently satire might look frivolous, it strives "to cure excess" and from this standpoint, its purpose is patriotic. In fact, western literature has popularised satire and given a fillip to its different forms in our literature. The avowed aim of satire is to prick illusions and repress eccentricity or exaggeration, "to lash the vices", as Martial says. It wields the Meredithian "sword of commonsense". Besides, on the analogy of what Juvenal had said to the query "why write satire", it can be said that satire was necessary in an age of misplaced values and cross-purposes as the one we had under the British. Chandra Barua and Dandi Kalita, only to mention two, are notable satirists of

our literature; they have adequately exposed the vain make-belief of society, its mockeries and the accumulating dross under its so-called glossy surface.

To be brief, the impact of western literature during British rule has created a new tendency in our literary history. It has reassured our literature with new technique and forms like drama and novel, story and essay, journalism and poetry. In poetry particularly, rigidity has given place to fluidity and fixity to plasticity. The introduction of blankverse with its run-on beauty has already been pointed out; the sonnet is another innovation. Hem Goswami (1872-1928) has produced the first authentic image of the sonnet in his *Priyatamar chithi*. The lyric grew and with it grew ballad literature that has attained great beauty in, for instance, L. N. Bezbarua's *Dhanbar aru Ratani* and C. K. Agarwalla's *Tejimala, Jalkonwari* etc. Folk-theme, which Henry Sidgwick has defined as "it is lore and belongs to the illiterate", was exploited by the educated romantic poets to create a new art-form according to their basic literary ideals. The modern ballad is a renovation of the ancient folk-ballad, literary development of a traditional art-form into a more cultured sensibility.

To sum up: this new age of our literature is essentially an age of re-discovery of the beauty of life, the soul of an inspiration embedded in a distinctive rhythm. An age of sensibility and imaginative freedom, this is an age in which the mind as well as the senses are in revolt, an uprising of long trammelled desire. Despite these foreign influences, it would be wrong for us to forget that the modern age of our literature has inherited a rich legacy from the ancient classics. We must remember another thing also: although our literature was considerably influenced and inspired by English literature under British rule, the rills of foreign influence were soon lost in a river that flowed from a more abundant spring. What had actually happened is that classical discipline, more particularly of religious and metaphysical inspiration, was steadily loosening its grip and in its place literature came to be more progressively humanised. Varied and rich in texture, this was primarily achieved through the renaissance of feelings and innovation of forms.

romantic poetry

INDIGENOUS BLOSSOMING of the human intellect is possible when old and traditional bonds are loosened and no new bonds or conventions usurp their place. Like the German literature of Goethe's age showing such a flowering, the age of *Jonaki* (1889) with L. N. Bezbarua and C. K. Agarwalla as pioneers shows such freedom and fulfilment for Assamese literature. It is true that this literary epoch did not begin as an active and organised crusade against established traditions, but as a spontaneous response on which influences coming from the west through English education were pronounced. Soon the romantic possibility of the new contact was recognised. Bezbarua and Agarwalla with their sensuousness, delight in colour, physical beauty, love and poetry exhibit what traditions romantic poets generally follow. These two poets together with Hem Goswami (1872-1928) constitute our romantic trio. They gave a redeeming flavour to the poetry of the *Jonaki* era both in technique and diction; it is they who freed Assamese literature from conventions, a freedom that was new to our literature. To the romanticists, the proper organ of poetry is imagination and its aim, the creation of beauty.

Mystery of life and creation and devotion to universal beauty on a higher aesthetic level are some of the subject-matter of C. K. Agarwalla's poetry; he is a poet primarily of patriotism and

philosophic thought. In his landscape portrait the sense of mystery, as in the poem *Phula sariyah dora*, is almost invariably present. The immutability of nature compared to its usual changing pattern is intensified as the poet gains in maturity; it is the burden of his poem *Prakriti*. The worship of beauty (*Saundajya*, *Niyar*) as with Keats or Ruskin was a religion and an aesthetic principle with Agarwalla. The romantic ideal of intangibility of things re-inforced with similar Vaishnava ideas became a mystic faith with him. It was of course not an intellectual passion with Agarwalla.

Agarwalla attained great success also as a lyricist of mythopoetic and supernatural themes (*Tejimala*, *Bonkonwari*, *Jalkonwari* etc.). On the other hand, *Madhuri*, descriptive of the physical and emotional beauty of a virgin is sensuous in appeal like something "fashioned in a dream". Unlike that of the romanticists of the west, the beauty of Agarwalla's poems springs from adroit concentration and economy of words and choice of epithets and images. Agarwalla is a philosopher before he is a poet; his poetry is introspective rather than intuitive, but the emotional element in it is so aptly balanced that it seldom suffers from the lack of poetical quality. His *Manav bandana* or the worship of man contains a note of sublimity and force. The metaphysical idea, basic in our philosophy, that "man is a beautiful hymn of God", to use Anatole France's words, finds an adroit expression in Agarwalla's poetry. His *Vin-varagi* is written on a similar concept, i.e., man is the "beauty and bloom" of the universe. To sum up: Agarwalla no doubt possesses the poet-philosopher's defects in qualities, but they are splendid qualities. In a sense, he is our Browning, not the "literary barbarian", but the penetrating psychologist. His collections of poems are *Pratima* (1914) and *Vin-varagi* (1923).

Lakshminath Bezbarua (1868-1938) has to his credit a number of love-lyrics, nature-poems, ballads and patriotic songs. A life-long exile in Shambalpur, he was constantly re-visiting in memory the hills, dales and rivers of his land of birth. With Bezbarua, the romantic fire leapt into living flames in metrical

romances of the ballad type like, for instance, *Dhanbar aru Ratani*. His imagination was fed on simple folk-tunes and ballad-music; in fact, he possessed the balladist's mind and music. On the other hand, Bezbarua's *Priyatamar saundajya*, written on the physical loveliness of the beloved, is, from the point of images and imagination, one of our finest sensuous love-poems. Bezbarua in whose poetry there is complete absence of morbid reflection is primarily a poet of joy; he refused to subscribe to the idea that the universe is an illusion. Besides his anthem for the people *O mor aponar desh*, Bezbarua's *Vin aru varagi* is a poem of stirring patriotic appeal.

To be brief, one must not forget that Bezbarua's work has its own limitations also. Except in about half a dozen poems, his poetic achievements are generally flippant as seen in the rest. This flippancy is not the result of intellectual imbecility. Often flippancy is the result of intellectual maturity also; this is the type that Bezbarua represents. Though he drew his inspiration primarily from English literature, he would not mimic even the cuckoos of foreign lands; this distinctiveness he tried to preserve with deft craftsmanship. L. N. Bezbarua's collection of poems is *Kodamkali* (1913).

Hem Goswami's (1872-1928) poems were mostly published in the *Asam Bandhu* (1885-1886). In point of diction, subject-matter and imagination, his poems are noted for their simplicity and other distinguishing qualities of romantic poetry. Goswami's collection of poems is *Phular chaki* (1907), a "real nosegay of flowers", to use Dr. S. K. Bhuyan's words. His *Puwa* is a tender nature-lyric, the significance of which is symbolic. Like Keats' *Grecian Urn*, composed on a piece of antique art, *Puwa* is said to be inspired by a picture of dawn appearing in the journal *Jonaki*. As dawn approaches, the lyre of life, tuneless for a time, again gets vibrated; it seems the poet adopts dawn as a symbol through which the dawn of a new literary light and renaissance is suggested.

Hem Goswami's *Kako aru hiya nibilao*, *Priyatamar chithi* and *Kakuti* together with Agarwalla's *Madhuri* and Bezbarua's *Malati*, *Pharing premika* *jui* etc. constitute the pioneer love-lyrics of modern

Assamese literature. Goswami's *Priyatamar chithi* popularised the sonnet for the first time in our literature as also the psychology of personal passion. In *Kakuti*, the loneliness of the poet's love-lorn soul is suggested through the symbol of a mango-tree cast in a lonely meadow. The usual technique of romantic poets is to idealise the beloved and to be eaten up with remorse. Dignified and restrained, although his remorse could not be as intense as that of Jatin Duara of the subsequent generation, it is as poignant.

Ananda Agarwalla (1874-1904), a translator of graceful lyrics, is an original balladist. His *Jilingani* (1920) contains poems like *Ishwar*, *Chaha aru pandit*, *Jivan sangit*, *Sukhar thai* etc., translated from English, which if the sources were not acknowledged, it would have been difficult to identify. Apart from his poem *Balam*, Agarwalla's ballads like *Panesoi*, *Phulkonwar* etc. remind one of the emotional tenderness and lucid expressiveness of L. N. Bezbarua's. The ballad *Phulkonwar* reveals Agarwalla's gifts at their finest, his lyrical sweep, lucid verse-music and above all the power of transport into an atmosphere of faery grace.

A poor imitator of Madhusudan Dutt's epic-method and blankverse, the literary historian remembers Chandradhar Barua (1874-1961) for his *kavyas* like *Meghnad badh*, *Kamrup Jiyari* etc. The common reader remembers him mostly as a satirist; many of the *Ranjan* poems are written with the purpose of attack on so-called orthodoxy. Barua makes no attempt at moralising. He gives to his satirical portraits a social background that is at once scrupulously true and fastidiously artistic.

As a romanticist, C. D. Barua's fame rests mainly on his love-lyrics; it is in lyrics like *Smriti* that the art and feeling of the poet are better represented than in the long *kavyas* of artificial style and stilted feeling. Towards the end, *Smriti* also suffers from certain technical flaw. This must be noted that C. D. Barua did not belong to the *Jonaki* cycle, nor did he belong to the post-*Jonaki* era of Raghu Chaudhury (b. 1879) or Jatin Duara (1892-1964); spiritually and temperamentally, he stands apart. If he has any relation with any of the poets of the post-*Jonaki* era, then it is

undoubtedly with Dandi Kalita (1890-1950); both of them are pungent in their satire.

Post-Jonaki Era :

Gibbon tells us, amongst the many wise things in his Autobiography, that every man has two educations: (i) that which he receives from his teachers, and (ii) that which he owes to himself. Physical ailment having stood on the way, Raghu Chaudhury had completed the second type of education. This poet who has expressed many moods and sensations and found the most fitting words to express them has succeeded in broadening the range of our poetry. Chaudhury is a poet of joy who more often than not calls upon nature, birds and flowers to share human delight and contribute to it. But this must be remembered that his is not the old "return to nature" extolled by Rousseau, nor is it that fine vein of the purely descriptive expressed by Scott. Like Swinburne, a splendid pagan, Chaudhury has found in the "reading of the earth" a solace from the battle of life. The poems *Ketaki* and *Dahikatara* are written in perfect intoxication of joy and freedom from care. In *Bahagir biya*, the poet breaks into ecstasies over the prospect of spring. Chaudhury does not mourn as Shelley does for "those ecstasies that are too rare" or for the fleeting apparitions of "intellectual beauty" and the "spirit of joy". Yet, the essence of his nature-poetry, as evident from *Golap* and *Girimallika*, is an over-abundant influence of joy "winking at the brim".

Free from the alloy of an alien spiritualism, Chaudhury's naturalism is not the twilight of an ecstasy felt in childhood, but a passion-oriented religion. The gleams of earth, sky, water and vegetation, the changes of season and the beauty of alternating landscape inspiring his poetry possess a tender rapturous charm that is invariably marked by a naturalness of description that can be said to be typical like oriental sketches. Throughout his physically struggling existence, Chaudhury has resorted to open spaces to commune with nature, to observe and study all living things, to form an attitude and develop a distinctive literary style; delicately refined in the reflected hues of assonance and allitera-

tion, his style is flawless in phrases and imageries. Chaudhury's poetical works are *Sadari* (1910), *Ketaki* (1918), *Karbala* (1923) and *Dahikatara* (1931).

Ambikagiri Rai-Chaudhury's (b. 1885) poetry has two pronounced aspects, mystic and patriotic. He owes much to his contact with the metaphysics and mysticism of the *Gita* and Vaishnava literature and no less to his understanding and elective taste for precision and imaginative vision. To the poet, beauty is a flower-like expression of the Divine Soul which is co-extensive with nature and which gives to everything its form. Rai-Chaudhury's *Tumi* (1915) opens with a sensuous description of the beloved's body. From the love of the individual it expands into the love of the universal and merges itself completely in the identification of the poet's soul with that of God's. It is the orison to a personal God that constitutes the genesis of the poet's mystic philosophy. Like a true seer, he concludes that the universe is a mysterious playground of the Creator where myriad symbols of His play lie scattered, from the beloved's beauty to a mother's love, each eloquent of a super-presence.

Rai-Chaudhury was imprisoned twice in connection with our struggle for freedom. Except two, all the poems of the *Songs of the Cell*, English translations of his Assamese poems, were rendered behind prison-bars. The poet is an apostle of patriotism; to him, it is a broad democratic enthusiasm for humanity. Rai-Chaudhury's songs are meant for "fighters who will conquer fear of death and will be deathless and unconquerable". If Nalini Devi's poetry teaches us faith, Rai-Chaudhury's instils courage into us. Nowhere does his optimistic philosophy find a better expression than in the brave lyric *Jivan kihak kai*. Likewise, his songs composed for the Pandu session of the Congress, 1926 are remarkable for their universality of approach and emotion, energy and flexibility of style. His other works are *Anubhuti* (1914), *Veen* (1916), *Bandok: chhandare*, *Sthapan kar sthapan kar* (1958) etc.

Jatin Duara (1892-1964) whose poetic career grew under the auspices of a journal called *Banhi* (1909-1933) is a poet's poet. Fate had mapped out his destiny and to this his betterness and

pessimism, as evident from his *paharani* poems, bear sincere testimony. As Shelley used to repeat in his fits of despair Peacock's lines like "man's happiest lot is not to be", so were the following equally significant lines of William Blake Duara's favourite :

So I turned to the garden of love
That so many sweet flowers bore,
And I saw it was filled with graves.

Reflected in the prisms of that is a myriad of broken sighs and shadows that sweep across his mind and are encased in his lyric outburst of pain, so typical of idealism in all ages. Succinctly speaking, Duara records the emotional despair of life as Bezbarua records its ecstasy.

Duara owes much to Shelley and Tennyson as to Omar Khayyam, Sufism and Tagore; often in his poetry, there are distinct echoes from these sources. *Sunya parichoi* is an adroit confession of a man who makes the romantic soul an object of his analysis. It is said that running water like music has the power to change misery into melancholy; nothing is more Rousseauite than the desire, Arnold attributes, to be "borne on forever down an enchanted stream". In Duara's *nawaria* group of poems, the desire to drift with the stream like a forlorn soul is emotionally vivid. Likewise, his *Katha kavita* (1933), written in the manner of Turgenev's poetic prose, is agonised meditation. Duara's doctrine of love is not exactly Platonic, it is passionate. Duara is our supreme lyricist; there is a buried lyric even in his prose.

The poet realises that love and beauty are not fixed eternal forms, an idea that runs through his poetry answering each other like the voices of a chorus. Wearied of life, the poet seeks, as in *Milan*, an eternal union with God, for, through the attainment of supreme bliss, life can be emancipated from the "burden of tears". Nalini Devi makes her illusion the occasion for a spiritual sojourn, Duara presents only cadenzas of a simple passion. The former has popularised *asim* (infinite) and the other *atit* (past) with agonising re-appraisals. But to be exact, Duara is read more for his melodious verse than for his sentiments. He is Shelley in melancholy and

Keats in music. Duara's publications are *Omartirtha* (1925), *Apon sur* (1938), *Banaphul* (1952), *Milanar sur* (1960) etc.

It is the implicit realisation of the Divine spirit in life and nature that constitutes the charm of Nalini Devi (b. 1898), Durgeswar Sarma (1885-1961) and A. G. Rai-Chaudhury. One of the tenets of mysticism is that no art which does not suggest the infinite is true art, and "beauty", Schelling said, "is a finite rendering of the infinite". Every aspect of earthly beauty is an emanation from above, diversified into many molecules. Unlike Rai-Chaudhury, Nalini Devi is a spiritual quietest who shares with the former magical cadence, rapturous thought and poetic ardour. There is a predominance of faith in her inspiration, and yet her best poems are devoted not to sacred themes. Nalini Devi never gets into the thorny depths of metaphysics or theology; she turns to the spiritual world as quietly as A. E. turned to eastern philosophy or James Stephens to the simple life of peasants and children. The central note of *Paramtrishna*, one of her best poems, is the imperishability of the soul; such is the doctrine of *karma*, of re-birth or transmigration of soul.

Like all mystic poetry, Nalini Devi's poetry has a kind of symbolism; her philosophy is a series of intuitive flights into the realm of the absolute with tranquil and imperious assurance. A ceaseless pining of the soul for the Infinite is the theme of her poem *Sosa ne*. *Sesh argha* is the spiritual struggle of a soul with a "spire of meaning". *Benu rob* is a hymn to the Beautiful whose presence in the "desert of her soul" is an ennobling experience. Nalini Devi's poetry is noted for a certain quality of spiritual absolutism; she is a mystic not by religious association but by temperament and ultimate vision. The negative, impersonal and detached aspect of God where the absolute is viewed as *neti neti* does not constitute the central *motif* of her poetry; to her, it is *Roso vai sah*, a positive, personal and adorable orison. Nalini Devi does not believe in asceticism as a creed or in the pessimistic doctrine of the Upanishads that holds that outside of the everblissful Brahma, all is *artah*. Compared to her *Sandhiyar sur* (1928) collection of poems which constitutes the landmark of her poetic achievement, the

subsequent poems collected in *Saponar sur* (1943), *Parasmani* (1954) and *Jugadevata* (1958) are anaemic.

Ratna Barkakati (1897-1963), a poet of serene vision, never fumbled with dusky fancies or vague imageries. His *Sewali* (1932) collection of poems exhibits the glow of a poetic gift for mystical effects that reveal a temperament which conceals the feverish questionings of a philosopher beneath a balanced style. Lines of great beauty as in *Sundar* or *Mor puja*, flights of imagination as in *Prakash badha* or *Taj Mahal* suddenly take wings and bear the reader to exhilarating heights. There is in these poems a pleasant quest and insight set off by a brightness of colouring and sound. Barkakati's style is suggestive and restrained. The true light of the Supreme Being manifests itself in the loveliness of nature which is generally comprehended through inner perception; it is this concept that fans into glow the metaphysical musings of some of his best poems in *Sewali*, poems on which Tagore's influence is distinctly evident. Barkakati's love-poetry is above all aspiration and desire; the object of his desire is generally centred on intellectual passion which submerges all feelings of duality into a feeling of oneness. In *Tilottama*, it is seen how pleasure is spiritualised into joy and joy becomes irradiated with an intellectual passion. Calmly passionate, *Viswa-haran* that combines an imaginative romanticism with the discipline of a sober form is one of Barkakati's best love-lyrics. Likewise, in *Taj Mahal* it is love crystallised into an epitome of radiant marble, spiritualised love, that captures the poet's imagination.

Barkakati sought to replace the luxuriant details of romanticism by chiselled architectural design in poetry; though often cold, this technical finish is marked by a note of accuracy and equipoise; some of his poems are instinct with a glowing pantheism. Although he fuses deftly the musical into the logical at times, Barkakati's music, broadly speaking, is not of the ethereal type. This is why some of his poems appear as emotionally decadent. To be brief, Barkakati is best enjoyed selectively. His other work is *Tarpan* (1953).

Dr. S. K. Bhuyan (1894-1964), whose first love was antiquarian

research rather than poetry, published his collection of poems *Nirmali* in 1918. His style suggests the leisure and refinement of a secluded university life. Dr. Bhuyan is least of all a nature-poet; yet then, some of his nature-lyrics are not without any searching appeal. In *Saundajya*, nature in her twilight beauty is portrayed as a maiden against the sky in the manner of D. G. Rossetti's Blessed Damozel leaning against the "bar of heaven". *Prakritir santan* is a mytho-poetic description of a child reared up in harmony with nature that is reminiscent of Wordsworth.

In *Sukhdukh*, Dr. Bhuyan repudiates the pessimistic view of life; although basically his philosophy of life is not optimistic, it is often as vivacious as Bezbarua's. Generally in love with all that savours of didacticism, he displays a lively interest in history and antiquarian studies; for this reason in particular, his verse at times tends towards a belated pseudo-Sanskrit style. *Joymati upakhyan* (1923), written under a pseudonym, Bhanunandan, is aptly illustrative of it. Nevertheless, it must not be overlooked that temperamentally Dr. Bhuyan is sincere in his romantic emotions, in evidence of which one has to turn to his poems like *Apon sur*, *Utala*, *Tipam deka*, *Asam gaurov* etc. *Utala* possesses rapid animation; this poem and a few other lyrics show that the poet is not deficient in that lyrical passion which carried to reasonable extremes could produce at times a sense of exaltation beyond the power of prose to create. This must be noted that Dr. Bhuyan's average performance does not usually sustain a high level. He does not have to his credit strikingly novel themes or forms of expression, nor is he considerably original.

As evident from her collections, *Phular sarai* (1929) and *Pranar parash* (1952), Dharmeswari Devi's (1892-1960) poetry pulsates with a certain measure of impassioned romanticism of the age. Although it partakes of the qualities partially of both, Devi's *Dhumuha* is not like Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* that echoes the poet's aspirations, nor is it like Robert Bridges' lyrical appreciation of nature's storm-washed beauty that one comes across in the poem *The Rain Set in*. Devi's *Sagar sangit* written during her visit to Srihctradham in 1950 is a simple lyric on the sea. Dharmeswari

Devi, a grand-motherly poet, loves the sea, for, it is forever playful like a child and time cannot write wrinkles on its face. In W. E. Henley's poem *The Full Sea Rolls*, the playful prospect of the sea enkindles in the poet the longing to be buried after death "not in the senseless earth, but in the living sea". Devi has no such aspiration; in her other sea-poem *Samudra sangit*, Devi calls the sea a hymn in its unbounded immensity to God.

Although not as deep-toned as Rai-Chaudhury's *Tumi* or Nalini Devi's *Paramtrishna*, in *Tumiyei neki* the poet gains the mystic height of a symbol through which she seeks solace in the Vedantic doctrine of an all-immanent power permeating through objects of sight and sound. In *Prakrita sukh kot*, through a process of ratiocination, she reaches the conclusion that real happiness transcends the material concerns of life and is the outcome of complete emancipation from self-interest. Dharmeswari Devi whose fine and discreet talent has a simplicity of its own is often associated with Nalini Devi, for, love of nature and spiritual absorption are qualities manifest in both. Yet, though usually exalted and devotional in theme, Devi's poems are not as rich and variegated in expression as those of Nalini Devi's.

Essentially a poet of mystic and philosophic thought, Durgeswar Sarma (1885-1961) possesses a sane and satisfying outlook on life and a spiritual bias to contentment. To Sarma, the art of poetry—to which he gives a sort of mystic exposition in his poem *Kavita*—is as old as the universe where imaginative vision and insight play a distinct part. Thus spiritualised, the mystic conception of life and creation becomes Sarma's own belief. Whether in *Jivan*, *Atma* or *Maran*, Sarma's mystic view of life is enflamed with a sober colouring from the poet's meditative mind. He expands the idea expressed in *Putali* that the universe is a toy of the Creator into a deep mystic faith in *Viswa bhawana*. God is the divine minstrel. The creation is no mere illusion. It is His song.

Nurtured in the romantic spirit of the West, Sarma, like romantic poets in general, sees the image of the beloved everywhere, "in the beauty of flowers", "in the flight of doves", to use Anatole France's words in a general way, and her absence in the true romantic

vein gives to the landscape a feeling of strange loneliness. *Kiba jen nai nai* is a delicious love-lyric; the almost feminine rhyming of the last lines rings like violin strings. Wordsworthian in his simplicity of approach, Sarma is Upanishadic in his mystic thought and diction. It is true that often he mystifies nature, but it is without any intrusion of pedanticism. Sarma's collections of poems are *Anjali* (1910) and *Nivedan* (1920).

Apart from his blankverse epic *Asom Sandhiya* (1949), a historical poem on the declining phases of Ahom rule under Ohandrakanta Singha that is noted for its technical finish, Dandi Kalita (1890-1950) is a remarkable satirist as evident from his collections of poems like *Rah-ghora* (1916), *Ragar* (1922) and *Bahurupi* (1926). In these satirical poems, now burning with patriotism and now with irony or wrath, what Kalita aimed at was dramatic effect through imaginative treatment. Despite the surface that is vividly stirred by tremors of laughter, these poems reveal the hidden energy of intention as also the dual qualities of things expressed. It is true that in his satires, Kalita does not reach a positive solution or offer an infallible conclusion, nevertheless, as evident from *Bahurupi*, the poet displays facts as they are under a painful light.

Kalita's satires are sharp and edged as evident from *Medhi tirthalai jai*; it is a poem noted for its "clash" brought out through delicate touches of humour and inconceivable fooleries, "between the Ideal and the Real", to say in the words of Crompton Rickett. Likewise, *Mota ne tiruta* is a brilliant piece of scorn. His poems *Abhijat sakalar prati* and *Anunnata* are on the other hand on a different key; their note is serious. *Anunnata* is about the "great unwashed", to use Edmund Burke's words, of our society; it is truly Gandhian in spirit. Kalita's poems on women as also his poem of mystic thought *Viswa Sangit* are equally inspiring. To sum up: in Dandi Kalita all the different notes of seriousness and raillery, laughter and tenderness mingle in full accord; it is like a harmony from which no strain could be dispensed with. Self-realisation comes with self-reliance and that alone can usher in a new civilisation; that is Kalita's social philosophy.

Rigid adherence to rules of regularity and pre-conceived

discipline often deprived Dimbeswar Neog's (b. 1900) poetry of tangible emotional appeal. Whenever he escaped from these restrictions, he produced poems of great strength and beauty like *Sapamukta*; this poem presents a mythopoetic conception of nature. It is in a sense a nature-myth; the poet accepts the rejuvenation of nature as a symbol. Through it he seeks to rouse the slumbering land to self-consciousness and patriotic pride. Likewise, Neog's *Maram bhikhari* is a poem of great idyllic beauty. His *Mukuta* (1932) is a collection of fourteen sonnets. Apart from the technical beauty of the sonnet, these lyrics like some of his poems in the *Indradhenu* (1930) collection are fresh as spring blossoms. A poem of tumultuous patriotic impulse, Neog's *Buranji lekhak* presents in absolute poetic fidelity the glories enshrined in the vaults of our history.

To sum up: this must be said that Neog's lyrics that might lead him anywhere into the hall of poetry are difficult of general classification, except as good or bad; poems of the type of *Sapamukta* are definitely good, while poems like *Am*, *Phani* etc. are indefinitely bad. Neog's other works are *Malika* (1922), *Thupitara* (1925), *Malati* (1927), *Shahide Karbala* (1940), *Meghdut* (1942), *Bichitra*, *Thapana* (1948) etc.

Sailadhar Rajkhowa (b. 1892) is noted for spontaneity of thought and felicity of expression. Besides *Barpeta* and *Bisandoi ali*, his *Pasan pratima*, reminiscent of D. Neog's *Sapamukta*, is a patriotic song of great appeal. In fact, it may be defined as a fine war-poem saturated with the annals of military valour and enlivened with the presence of two divine maidens, Phulora and Chotola, ultimately frozen to rocks because of frustrated love. Rajkhowa's *Humar kasat* is an apostrophe to "wedded love", a poem noted for its resolution to beauty in pious reverence. It would be wrong to suppose that this poem was written with a purpose to show the futility of romantic love.

Although the number of Rajkhowa's verses destined to outlast the ravages of time is limited, poems like the *Amanisha* ode entitle him to recognition for all time to come as the creator of liquid sonorities and pictorial symbol. This poem is elegiac in tone.

The rhythm of the poem, suggestive of tragic intensity, is subtly wedded to its emotions. Likewise, *Niyati*, an elegiac poem is composed under deep feeling. In point of music and beauty of conception, this poem reminds one of Walter de la Mare's *The Silver Penny*.

Though *Jyotikona* (1938) establishes Nilmani Phukan (b. 1880) as a poet of mystic thought, social problems also engaged the attention of this poet-cum-politician. Except poems of the type of *Varagir tirtha*, written in limpid ballad metre, Phukan has imported into poetry the peculiar excellence of prose which grows stilted when it seeks to soar. Because of his sincerity in depicting real life, it would be wrong to say that the poet takes recourse to wordy pomposity or to an ambling style. His poems like *Bhikahu*, *Dukhiram* etc. are full of passionate sympathy for the socially downtrodden. More often than not, Phukan takes liberty with his rhymes, but never with his images and metaphors.

An octogenarian by now, Phukan has taken to poetry late in life and this is why he appears at times a somewhat unstable synthesis of different lines of descent, romantic and classical, mystic and metaphysical; often his poetry produces an oppressive sense of "metaphysicalism". By reading his poems like *Akash*, *Sabda Brahma*, *Nistabdha* etc. this can be said that the poet is endowed with the rare gifts of perception and reflection, gifts that have saved him from undue imitation. The *Jyotikona* sonnets end with a couplet which invariably contains a maxim. True it is that Phukan exalts ideas above passion, intellect above emotion and this is perhaps one of the reasons why his poetry lacks the ardour of spontaneous creation. He may not possess the fine power of phrasing, nevertheless he possesses the power to pack his lines with thought. As a mystic poet, Phukan has neither the powerful concentration of Nalini Devi nor her radiant focus of spiritual lyricism or thrill of the infinite. His *Manasi* (1943) collection is however different. As evident from poems like *Arupar rup*, *Manas pratima*, *Sundar tani kot*, *Hetu aru prattoi*, *Jalkonwari* etc., *Manasi* represents search for intellectual beauty that is super-sensuous in its content and spirit. *Jalkonwari* has easy cadence of verse that

adds music and beauty to the poem as a happy blend of light and colour adds poetry to painting. Phukan's other poetical works are *Gutimali* (1950), *Jingiri* (1951), *Amitra* (1952) and *Sandhani* (1953).

Lakshminath Phukan (b. 1897) has written impassioned love lyrics; these are collected in a book called *Sonali sapon* (1961). The poet's emotions which he does not dwell on in the full radiance of their emergence are generally refined in sensibility. Noted for its quiet intensity of grief, the poem *Saakhi* is a landscape view of the lover's heart. In *Moran belika* as also in *Saakhi*, the poet gives beautiful snapshots of atmosphere and melody; the best of his lyrics as the former are also the saddest. In criticism it is often said that Phukan's love-lyrics are "rather cold". Although he does not shriek in pain as Shelley did, that his love-lyrics possess artistic form and purity of style cannot be denied. It is true that there is an absence of luscious qualities in his verse, nevertheless, in quiet beauty and calm appeal, it won't be far-fetched to say that they are like Chinese porcelain. Phukan's best lyric-poem *Brahmaputrar prati* can be described as a landscape portrait with patriotism as its central *motif*; in it, historical associations are re-vitalised through an art that is at once suggestive and evocative. The verse-beat keeps tune with the rhythm of patriotic ideal, a medium through which Phukan gives beautiful glimpses of melody and atmosphere bathed in a warm and tranquil glow.

Binanda Barua's (b. 1905) poetic fame rests principally on his patriotic poems rather than on his nature-lyrics that are few. True to the tradition stimulated by romantic ideals, "going back to a fancied golden age", as Brandes says, Barua has quickened the knowledge and love of our national past through his poetry; his collection of poems *Sangkhadhani* (1925) is an evidence in point. In *Smasan*, the vagrant minstrel, sad and pensive, sees the vision of our country melting into a crematory, for, the genial current of freedom adding "bloomy flushes" to her face is not there; our country is only a sepulchre of past greatness. Like Goldsmith's "sweet Auburn" turned into a "deserted village", foreign hordes have devastated Assam into a "haunt of bitterns"; this is the bitter

irony of the poem. *Rangamuar vir*, *Agiyathutir vir* etc. are patriotic poems with historical themes. *Rangpur* is a poem of swelling musical cadence, the effect of which is achieved through assonances and consonantal repetition. Closely allied in spirit to *Rangpur* is Barua's other poem *Gargoan*; nowhere in our poetry as in the quaintly lovely lines of this poem, the historical atmosphere of independent Assam with her dignity, vigour and colour is more picturesquely painted. Binanda Barua's other poetical work is *Pratidhani* (1938).

Mitradev Mahanta's (b. 1895) most notable gift is humour that is both urbane and hearty. Though he lacks the satiric severity of Dandi Kalita, Mahanta as a satirist is easily comparable with the former in more than one respect. But in ironic humour, his only peer is Chandradhar Barua; the resultant humour of Mahanta's satire is at the expense of classes rather than individuals. Although known primarily as a writer of light verse, Mahanta's songs like *Chira chenehi mor*, *Kane kane batahi bai* etc. show him as a poet of considerable lyrical gifts.

Poet, playwright and prose-writer, Atul Hazarika (b. 1906) writes more like a man who has gone into a library of harnessed emotions than as one who has directly contacted nature or experienced life so as to reflect its spirit. The opening lines of his poem *Balichar* glimmer in a radiance of beauty as the Brahmaputra sandbanks glimmer under sunlight. The poet has a number of bird-poems, viz., *Dahikatara*, *Patmadai* etc. and also flower-poems like *Kanchan*, *Indramalati* etc. to his credit; these poems do not possess of course the beauty and dignity of Raghu Chaudhury's on similar subjects. To be brief, his birds are lifeless like stuffed birds. Hazarika's attitude towards nature is of the Wordsworthian romantic type and not of the critical type of Tennyson or Matthew Arnold: this latter type is almost unknown in our literature.

Except in *Devadasi*, a poem that may be described as Hazarika's best, the poet's natural gifts are seen better in his patriotic poems. In *Devi ne rahshashi*, the patriotic ideal is conveyed through an allegory. Likewise, his nature-poems like *Varsamangal*, *Barisar dak* etc. have a distinct message for man, i.e., message for a people

lost in slumber. *Mahaprasathan*, apparently an elegy on L. N. Bezbarua, is not an elegy as such on a single individual; it is more comprehensive than that. Besides patriotic poems, other significant poems of Hazarika are *Mor puja* and *Devadasi*. The latter presents the picture of a *devadasi*, vestal virgin, determined to touch the marble heart of the temple deity through concentrated passion, dance and music; she seeks final emancipation from the agony of transmigrated soul which is possible only through union with God. Hazarika's poetical works are *Manimala*, *Mukutamala* (1930), *Panchajanya* (1931), *Dipali* (1938) etc. Daiba Talukdar (b. 1900) who writes about nature and life's problems and Parvati Barua (1904-1964) who has given to our poetry a refreshing aroma of the soil are noteworthy contemporaries of Atul Hazarika.

Ananda Barua (b. 1907) who has to his credit exquisite translations of Marlow's *The Passionate Shepherd to his Love* and Swinburne's "If love were what the rose is" has imbibed, broadly speaking, the former's passion and the latter's polish, qualities that are easily discernible in his style. Spontaneity rather than anaemic virtuosity is one of Barua's dominant qualities. His poetical works are *Parag*, *Ranjan rashmi* and *Hafizar sur* (1933); the last one is a translation from Hafiz.

Within an intimate and modest array of themes, Kamaleswar Chaliha's (b. 1904) poetry is abstract and analytical in a restrained sense. In his *Gungun* (1928), there are some delightful poems of eager raptures: *Taru*, *Dhuli*, *Kavir prati phul*, *Abhoy* etc. Chaliha cannot generally rid himself of abstractions; often there are evidences of obscure symbolism in his poetry. Not only an admirer but an imitator as well of Tagore, the latter's influence seems to be more potent on this poet than on Ratna Barkakati, an avowed Tagorite; this is the impression one gets from Chaliha's *Chhandita* (1941). *Rajmau pukhuri*, written on a historical site, reminds one of Tagore's *Shahjehan* not only in conception but also in imageries and vocabulary. In *Byartha Meghdut*, the influence of Tagore's vocabulary is blantly strong. Even the repetition of words in the manner of Tagore in Chaliha's *Sesh lekha*, *aye katha*, *aye katha*, *aye matra katha* is distinctly reminiscent of Tagore. To be

brief, what Chaliha has succeeded in capturing is Tagore's echoes, not his spirit as such.

Sariyahani in which the panoramic beauty of mustard blooms is woven into a pattern of joy is one of Chaliha's best lyrics. The idea is expressed more aptly in his *Kavir prati phul* and *Lekhakar samal*. The poet's attitude to nature is not pantheistic; it is mystical. This must be said that there is a difference even between Chaliha's own prose and poetry; it is so mainly because of the density of verbal texture and abstruse stressing of the idea in the latter. Nevertheless, the more substantial part of his positive thought is to be found not in his prose, but in his poetry. In music and mystic vision, Chaliha is more limited than Nalini Devi and in the grasp of life, less comprehensive than Ratna Barkakati.

J. P. Agarwalla's (1903-51) poems like his songs *Bharat Janani*, *Uddudhan*, *Luitar parare* etc. are noted for their patriotic appeal. Few poems on their first appearance were able to create a greater furor than his *Deka-gabharur ukti*, published in the *Awahon*; the emotional sinews of the poem are redeemed by poignant allusion to the martyrdom of Kanaklata, a girl of fourteen, during the 1942 struggle for freedom. *Pari passu* with it, the other aspect of his poetry, how at times an extensive ingenuity which was temperamental with Agarwalla led him to over-spectacular conclusions and opulent romantic luxuriance must not be lost sight of. Yet, it must be said that Agarwalla is a poet of lucid lyricism which is however different from the feminine aesthetics of Jatin Duara or Gonesh Gogoi.

Here a few other poets of the elder generation may be mentioned : Padmadhar Chaliha (b. 1895) and Prasannalal Chaudhury (b. 1902) are primarily poets of patriotism. While the ideal of the former is academic, that of the latter, as evident from his *Agnimantra* (1952), is militant; he enlivens the dying embers of A. G. Rai-Chaudhury with a passion. The names of two eminent political personalities, T. R. Phukan (1877-1939) and N. C. Bardoloi (1876-1936) who like the diver in Schiller's ballad plunged into politics of struggle, initiated by Gandhiji, may also be mentioned here. The note of Phukan's *Ai mor Asom* is soft as a contralto. Bardoloi's *Shyam*

jeuti Asom ai dhunia is a hymn to mother Assam; its militant note becomes evident only towards the end with the poet worshipping the Sakti-image of the mother. Bardoloi who loved to sing of the quiet things of life, as in *Sisur hanhi*, could tune his note to the heroic with no uncertain strains as in *Deka gabharur dol*; it is a poem not of a nation weeping over or lamenting its fate, but of one girding itself for battle. Though not strictly speaking romanticists, other noteworthy poets of this generation are Indreswar Barthakur (1887-1960), Jamuneswari Khataniar (1899-1924) and Singhadatta Deva Adhikari (1889-1925).

One might forget Gonesh Gogoi's (1907-1938) love-poems, if such a thing is possible, but not his patriotic poems like *Puja ayujan*. A departure from the monotone of traditional patriotic poems in which emotional appeal was sought to be created through vague sentimental allusions mostly, this poem is symbolic in conception and distinctive in music and beauty. Lyrical intensity, often appallingly opulent, is the keynote of Gogoi's love-poems; he can be connected with Jatin Duara in temperamental approach and attitude; the similarity is one of passionate urge and refreshing simplicity.

Gonesh Gogoi shares much more than any one else in the sustained prolongation of romantic sentimentalism. He felt too keenly the thrill of romantic longing and seems to have broken down like an electric wire charged with too strong a current. Gogoi was faithful through life to beauty, writing about what was worthy of love; he envisaged his theme, the plaint of love, now sadly and now passionately, lavishing upon it a copious flood of sound and colour. To be brief, sensitive to the appeal of beauty and conscious equally of its transience, Gonesh Gogoi's poetry has a melodious wailing music, an intense note of sentimental sadness, the total effect of which is an appalling sense of monotony and meaningless repetition. Not even romantic poetry could be great without intellectual animation, and this is what Gogoi's poetry sadly lacked. His poetical works are *Papari* (1935), *Swapna bhanga* (1934) and *Rupajyoti* (1945).

Among other poets of the thirties and mid-forties in whose hands

the romantic trend continued undiminished, mention may be made of Sashi Gogoi, Bhabanath Hazarika, Bhabananda Rajkhowa, Dulal Barpujari and Bhabaprasad Rajkhowa. Among others, Thaneswar Hazarika (1898-1943) had shown great sensitivity of perception and expression. M. N. Deka-Phukan who has to his credit fine lyrics like *Purani putala* is another poet of this generation.

In the words of Victor Hugo on Baudelaire, it might be said that Deva Barua (b. 1914) "created a new shudder" with his poems that depict the perennial perplexities and exhilaration of love. He possesses the faculty of naturalistic interpretation which serves him as an instrument in transmuting the quintessence of natural beauty and images into the language of poetry. Without any exaggeration this might be said of Barua that the beauty of his poetry consists in the arrangement of images and impressions done with a deftness that generally a Japanese flower-artist possesses. The poet's voice is seldom lifted into an outburst of intense joy, nor is it allowed to shrill into reckless complaint or disturbed by any touch of cynicism or superior disdain. Even in poems of separation like *Kalang parat*, the poet maintains a perfect poise in the "silent manliness of grief".

Deva Barua's innovation in form is the introduction of dramatic monologues on which Virginia Woolf's, more particularly Robert Browning's influence is amply discernible. His most popular poem *Tumi nubujiba sakhi* reads like Virginia Woolf's "interior monologues"; in it, the poet's soul and the sea are bound in the identical aspects of tranquillity and disturbance in a way that is basic and bewitching. With maturity, there has been a corresponding development in the intellectual content of his poems. In dignity of poise and conception, Barua's *Tilottama* with its Swinburnean sweep is seldom surpassed; from the point of abstract thought, *Urvasi bidai* can be closely associated with it. Urvasi is a myth; according to common conception, she is a heavenly courtesan who dances in the paradise of Indra, but with Barua she is a symbol of freedom and fulfilment, a symbol of ecstasy in contrast to the evanescent nature of earthly love.

The emotional ecstasy of Deva Barua is often imbued with a

philosophy, the idea of an omniscient destiny governing man's life and all that it means. There is a spiritual logic that governs man's life which the Greeks call *nemesis*. With Barua, the inspiration of this philosophy is more from Ibsen and Thomas Hardy than from the Greek theory. This acknowledgement of destiny has not succeeded in making the poet's view of life pessimistic. To Hardy, for instance, the greenwood tree does not suggest joy or delight, but destiny, a pair of blue eyes not heaven or bliss, but fate. With Barua, it is otherwise; the Epicurean sensibility of life, as illustrated in the poem *Devadasi*, has its spell on the poet.

Deva Barua found much in contemporary life that had disgusted him; with considerable skill and insight, he has pilloried certain socio-political tendencies in the poem *Lachit Barphukan*; the historical figure of Lachit Barphukan is used in the poem as a symbol to give coherence to the incoherent material of contemporary life. Except *Ami duar mukali karo* which is an intellectual departure from his older poems, Barua has however not written anything significant after *Lachit Barphukan*, published about a couple of decades back. Of late, he has left the flowery field of poetry for power politics. Barua's collection of poems is *Sagar dekhisa* (1945).

THE ASSAMESE drama, as drama in other parts of India, is a process that has extended its limits and displayed novel forms throughout its existence. This is the nature of all true art, for, true art both creates and reproduces. The art of drama is empirical; it is related to a living theatre. Its idiom is not only intended to be read by the eye, but also to be spoken and felt in the emotional atmosphere of a theatre. The new theatre has created its own forms, although in the initial stages of its development it absorbed much from the traditional, *i.e.*, the Vaishnava *bhawana*-theatre and drama.

The main streams of inspiration of the new theatre and drama may broadly be divided into two: (i) the tradition of Vaishnava *bhawana*-theatre and drama, and (ii) an academic tradition to which attention was directed by western education and literary influences. The modern Indian theatre of the urban type emerged under the auspices of the British European community after the last battle of Plassey; they created it for their own enjoyment and to keep alive home traditions. The Indian theatre, so sired, grew powerfully in Bengal and Maharashtra; the modern theatre in Assam like the Calcutta theatre, Minerva, Star, Manmohan etc. is an offshoot of this tradition. At first, only a cross-section of these influences came to the new theatre through

the Calcutta stages; later on, it became more direct through the spread of western education resulting in the release of new creative forces and cohesion of forms.

The literary art of drama cannot be isolated from the stage arts; it is not possible for the historian of the drama or theatre to neglect either. Apart from stage setting, costumes etc., necessary accessories of the theatre, western traditions popularised new technique of the drama, a greater sense of form, planned divisions of Acts and scenes, soliloquies, asides, plot development, characterisation and blankverse. Gunabhiram Barua's (1837-1894) *Ram Navami* (1857) and Hemchandra Barua's (1835-97) *Kaniya Kirtan* (1861) are pioneers of the new drama. This must be noted in this connection that dislocation of the established political system caused by repeated Burmese invasions and ultimate consolidation of British rule stood as barrier against the natural process of evolution of our literature. But to be precise, the drama tradition was not dead as such; despite these convulsive setbacks, it was kept alive by the Vaishnava *bhawana* tradition of the people.

In fact, the foundation of modern Assamese drama was laid with the popularisation of dramas of social criticism like G. R. Barua's *Ram Navami*, H. C. Barua's *Kaniya Kirtan* and Rudraram Bardoloi's *Bangal-Bangalani* (1871); how far these playwrights were directly influenced by western technique, it is difficult to say, but that they introduced Acts and scenes and atleast in one case a tragic type, opposed to established Sanskrit aesthetics, is significant. Although not a tragedy in the Senecan or Shakespearean sense, *Ram Navami* (1857) might be described as the first tragic drama in our language. Whatever the influence of western technique, that the inspiration was primarily Anglo-Bengali, Calcutta theatre and Bengali literature under the impact of English education, there is no doubt. For the new class emerging under British impact, Calcutta was the principal source of inspiration in social thought and literary technique.

Apart from the introduction of western technical devices, the new drama was made action-oriented and "conflict" in charac-

ter and action came to be, to say with Alardyce Nicoll, its "soul"; the *ankiya-nat* of the Vaishnava type was religious, the new drama is humanised in the social sense and even when it is historical or mythological in theme, the human interest is neither distorted nor lost sight of. Modern Assamese drama can be divided into three categories: (i) Serious and light comedies, farce etc., (ii) Mythological and historical, and (iii) Socio-psychological plays. The first category is generally village-centric, the rest are mostly urban-oriented. To be brief, there can be no water-tight division of our drama into categories according to the characteristics of a particular span of years; very often than not, tendencies over-lap. Only when literary types are determined by socio-psychological tendencies of an age, for instance as in the case of English drama—determinism, neo-classicism, materialism, dialectism etc.,—then alone a particular literary tendency can be accordingly defined; with modern Assamese drama, it is not so.

Particularly because of the imperceptible challenge thrown at accepted values and a new psychology of reason making itself felt under altered political conditions, a phenomenon that pinpointed the chinks inherent in our social fabric, the comedy of manners of the Ben Jonsonian type became popular during this period. Whether they could or could not rouse people's conscience to problems that eroded social thinking of a rational type, these plays succeeded at least by a kind of "forensic logic" to make the audience laugh at themselves on realising how stupid they were.

Our first modern drama *Ram Navami* is different; it is a serious play that depicts the problem of widow marriage. The story pivots round Navami, a girl widow, falling in love with an educated young man Ramchandra whom she could not marry because social sanction was against widow marriage; their ultimate fulfilment was in death. Although characterisation and dialogues are weak and certain minor devices are drawn from Sanskrit aesthetics, *Ram Navami* is primarily western in technique; it reflects the new rationalised thought initiated by Vidyasagar of Bengal. The sub-plot in the play, a parallel love-story of two unsophisticated village-folks, Mongalu and Sonphuli,

reflects Shakespearean technique; the introduction of the *sutradhara* in the end connects it with Vaishnava *ankiya-nata* tradition.

H. C. Barua's *Kaniya Kirtan*, a play in three Acts, is a comedy; the different fragments of social life, often disjointed, that are presented in it are calculated to serve a purpose. It depicts the evil effects of opium eating, a vice that almost ruined our people. Kirtikanta, a youngman of a rich family ruins himself completely by this atrocious habit. Besides this dismal picture, there are other snapshots of social degradation caused by attachment to false religion and meaningless orthodoxy. The structure of the play is loose all through; possibly it is because of this that the play fails to achieve its avowed aim, *i.e.*, to rouse emotions of antipathy against social evil. Although the climax and catastrophe of the situation are not well-developed in the dramatic sense, it nevertheless tells a complete story.

Poor in character development and plot construction, Rudraram Bardoloi's *Bangal-Bangalani* (1871) is thematically a vulgar play. It lampoons within its eight-Act compass certain aspects of social problems created by outsiders coming to the land during British rule. As in *Ram Navami*, the author of this drama also introduces the *sutradhara* as a connecting link between some of the episodes of the story. It would however be wrong to say that these three pioneer dramas, *Ram Navami*, *Kaniya Kirtan* and *Bangal-Bangalani* are written in the Ben Jonsonian tradition; except L. N. Bezbarua flirting with it in his light-hearted comedies and farces, the impact of Ben Jonson does not seem to inspire these writers.

From what particular date western technique had its unmistakable impact on our drama, it is difficult to be precise, but that it was initiated by *Bhrama ranga* (1888), translation of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, there is little or no doubt; the translation of this work was done jointly by R. D. Barua, R. K. Barkakati, G. Barua and G. S. Barua under the guidance of L. N. Bezbarua at Calcutta. Although western dramatic technique was initiated through this translated version of Shakespeare, blankverse was yet to be adopted. *Bhrama ranga* is a prose translation. With skill and imaginative

rendering, action in the translated play is given a local venue; and the characters are also given a local colour.

Under the inspiration of *Bhrama ranga*, a spate of translations from Shakespeare followed over a number of years, which helped to stabilise an initial impact into a significant experience. An adaptation rather than a translation of Shakespeare's *As You Like it*, it was through Durgeswar Sarma's *Chandravati* (1910) that blankverse came to reinforce and stabilise a tradition, already introduced by Chandradhar Barua a few years earlier in his mythological drama *Meghnad vadh* (1904). This was followed by translations of *Macbeth* by D. Bharali, *Cymbeline* by A. P. Goswami, *Troilus and Cressida* by N. C. Bardoloi, *Merchant of Venice* and *King Lear* by Atul Hazarika, *Romeo and Juliet* by Padma Chaliha etc. Thus a tradition was steadily established. Shakespearean influence in technique and form became a source of great inspiration to our contemporary playwrights. For instance, while L. N. Bezbarua's Gojpuria in *Chakradhvaj Singha* is modelled after Shakespeare's Falstaff, the mob scene in *Julius Ceasar* finds its echo in Indreswar Barthakur's *Srivatsa Chinta* (1923); Benudhar Rajkhowa's *Seuti Kiran*, a romantic drama of love, shows the influence of both *Othello* and *Hamlet*.

From P. N. Gohain-Barua and L. N. Bezbarua to Pravin Phukan and Kumud Barua, the tradition of light comedies or farces continues in an unabated stream; some of these plays have no other authentic purpose than to create an atmosphere of incongruity and laughter, while others exhibit a certain measure of social purpose in the way of ironic undertone. Bezbarua's *Litikai* (1890), serialised in the *Jonaki* from its first issue, is a light comedy of revenge. His three other light comedies based on the ludicrous can best be described as farces of inferior quality. The stage effect is sought to be achieved by exaggerated emphasis on the incongruity of situation, inconsistency of character and malapropistic use of words.

It is said that "comedy represents in a ridiculous light the aberrations from the social norm", but in these dramas of situation by Bezbarua where types are said to be handled, nowhere is

evident the author's capacity for cool, objective appraisal of social norms and deviations from them. True it is that like Ben Jonson, this playwright tried to sport with "human follies" and "not with crimes", but this must be remembered that Bezbarua's genius was essentially attuned to the non-serious like that of a talkative child prattling about. By his light comedies and farces, Bezbarua has pointed out the foibles of human character, but mere pointing out leaves a vacuum if it is not stimulated by social thinking. The vacuum thus created is filled up by the playwright's more serious plays, mainly historical in inspiration, that are dealt with separately.

Of P. N. Gohain-Barua's three light comedies, *Gaonbura* (1899), *Tetun Tamuli* (1909) and *Bhut ne Bhram* (1924), the first is undoubtedly the author's best; it is better than L. N. Bezbarua's light comedies or farces. The emphasis in *Gaonbura* is as much on situation as it is on characterisation. The central character Bhogman is a type by himself; the character of the man is studied in the context of social currents of the time and against the background of corrupt practices indulged in by petty government officials emerging as a privileged class under British rule. The play has a "corrective" purpose. The other two plays, *Tetun Tamuli* and *Bhut ne Bhram* do not come up to the standard of *Gaonbura* in the delineation either of character or situation; yet then, all the three are noted for their refreshing rural idiom. Another noted comedy of manners is Durgaprasad Majumdar-Barua's *Mohari* (1893); the plot of the play is thin, but the situation is piquant. It presents a powerful snapshot of tea-garden life, the profligacy of its European manager Mr. Fox and the helplessness of Bhogram, garden mohorur, whose knowledge of English is less than elementary. The characters are painted in robust outline, but its humour is essentially grotesque. That type of humour which stimulates intellect with brilliant flashes of wit rather than superficial cause for laughter through incongruities grew neither in the hands of Bezbarua nor in the hands of any of his contemporaries. Except in the case of Pravin Phukan, Lakshya Chaudhury and Durgeswar Barthakur, broadly speaking,

no serious attempt has so far been made in this direction. Though refined, as evident from *Prajapatir bhul*, even Lakshmidhar Sarma's humour was circumscribed.

As a writer of light comedies, Benudhar Rajkhowa belongs to the generation of Bezbarua and Gohain-Barua. His plays are *Darbar* (1902), *Tini ghaini*, *Ashikshita ghaini*, *Topanir parinam* (1932), *Jampuri* (1931) and *Chorar sristi*. Some of these plays portray weak spots in domestic life. To be precise, Rajkhowa is gifted neither with the rural insight of Gohain-Barua nor with the literary idiom of Bezbarua. Except presenting certain snapshots from urbanised parapets, his plays do not go much further either as social "correctives" or as technically inspiring pieces. The line of demarcation between the two is generally thin, yet then, these plays may be described as comedies of errors rather than as comedies of manners. According to Hardin Craig, comedies of errors are the "most artificial of comedies". Other writers of light comedies are Chandradhar Barua (*Bhaigya pariksha*, 1915), Padma Chaliha (*Nimantran*, 1915, *Kene maja*, 1920), Mitradhev Mahanta (*Biya biparjyoi*, 1924, *Kukuri kanar athmangala*, 1917), Lakshmi Sarma (*Atma-sanman*, *Prajapatir bhul*), Karuna Barua (*Madhumastarar garu*), Kumud Barua (*Good-night Sir, Ltd. Company*), Lakshya Chaudhury (*Javanikar are are*) and Pravin Phukan (*Kalparinoy*, *Assam Hollywood*). L. Chaudhury's *Javanikar are are* is of the nature of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*; its humour is deep and comprehensive. P. Phukan's *Kalparinoy* is a social satire, not without a touch of cynicism and sarcasm directed against all those who have become misguided "quotations", to say in the language of Dr. Radhakrishnan, of western manners.

Of all the arts, drama has the closest social reference, for, nothing else is so much supported and sustained by society as this literary form. This is true that our social dramas often tended to become satirical; it is so because of the censorious spirit that was inherent in society and was stimulated by conflicting transitional purposes. Ben Jonson who used comedy to castigate human foibles, ridiculing them often with unmitigated vehemence, tried to soften down the

sting by describing his comedies as "humours". With our social playwrights, it was otherwise; their wrath was not concealed, for, what they were primarily concerned with was "stage effects". Speaking from the point of drama, it needed irony and sarcasm, intrigue and tragic intensity to achieve this effect.

(ii) *Mythological and Historical Dramas :*

Like dramas of social criticism, the new mythological drama emerged also during the last decade of the 19th century. It was during this decade that modern play-houses arose and gave a technical fillip to the art of drama. Between 1895 and 1904, several play-houses were established in different urban areas of the Brahmaputra valley. This must be remembered here that a drama is written primarily, as pointed out by George Bernard Shaw, for the theatre. Dr. S. Sarma is of the opinion that Ramakanta Chaudhury's *Sita haran*, written between 1870-1880, is the first mythological drama of the modern period. Thus a tradition was revived, a tradition that was already engrained in our Vaishnava *ankiya nata*; this new tradition might not actually be a transcript of that, but that it had certain impact in revivalism, there is little doubt. Broadly speaking, the technical inspiration of this drama came from the Anglo-Bengali source of Michael Madhusudan Dutt and the thematic from the Vaishnava fountain-head. It was in 1893 that P. K. Deva Sarma's *Harishchandra* was published, which was followed soon after by *Haradhanu bhanga* by the same author. Two other dramatists of these decades are H. Sarma Barua (*Abhimanyu vadh*, *Sakuntala*) and D. N. Bardoloi (*Baidehi bished*). During the opening years of the 20th century, the following mythological dramas were produced: B. Rajkhowa's *Durju-dhanar urubhanga*, (1903) and *Daksha Yajna*, D. P. Majumdar-Barua's *Guru dakshina* (1903) and *Brisaketu*, and C. D. Barua's *Meghnad vadh* (1904). Barring the historical significance they possess, these dramas, barring the last, do not have any substantial technical importance; they are depraved in thought and imagination. Unimaginative emphasis on dissipating theatricality has deprived them of any creative merit of note.

The admitted inspiration of C. D. Barua's *Meghnad vadh*, a blankverse play, is Madhusudan Dutt's *kavya* on the same theme. Though the pattern is fixed, it is elastic in scope, for, much liberty can naturally be taken in the depiction of mythological characters; each character can be made to represent a certain aspect of human life like virtue or vice, valour or vaingloriousness. This, Madhusudan Dutt who drew his inspiration principally from European literature, Greek and English, and generally modelled his characters on Homer in particular, has done. The impact of it is vivid in Barua; whether in character delineation by contrast, as in the case of Rama and Ravana, or in plot construction, Barua has shown considerable craftsmanship in *Meghnad vadh*; compared to *Tilottama sambhav* (1924) and *Rajarshi*, *Meghnad vadh* is the playwright's best drama. Studded with about two dozens songs, *Tilottama sambhav* has neither stage merit nor literary quality. Likewise, *Rajarshi* is of inferior technical merit.

Durgeswar Sarma has to his credit two mythological plays: *Partha parajay* (1909) and *Bali vadh* (1912). He has not deviated from the accepted mythological pattern in a big way, yet then, the influence of Shakespeare's dramatic craft on the playwright is pronounced. The characters are humanised; barring the introduction of Ganga in a significant dramatic role, the rest of *Partha parajay* is an authentic transcript of mythology. The main focus in the drama is not on Partha, but on Vabrubahana, his adversary; this shift in focus gives naturally a tense romantic quality to the mythological episode. Some other mythological dramas of a similar type are: Balaram Pathak's *Labakusa* (1914), Dhaniram Datta's *Urvashi uddhar*, I. S. Barthakur's *Srivatsa Chinta* (1927), Mitradev Mahanta's *Baidehi biyug* (staged: 1930) and *Balichalan* (1953), P. N. Gohain-Barua's *Banraja* (1932), Dandi Kalita's *Agni pariksha* (1937) and *Kisak vadh* etc. Except being faithful transcript of mythology with the object of exploiting man's inherent faith in religious and spectacular deeds, these dramas do not transmit any tangible idea. Their mind being attuned already to the religio-romantic atmosphere depicted in the plays, it was easy for the audience to comprehend

the meaning of these dramas and thus satisfy their cathartic ego.

In the subsequent years following this creative period, the womb of both mythology and history seemed to have dried up; This era of indigenous work was succeeded by an era of translation from Bengali. With the Bengali drama came naturally the Bengali *yatra* theatre, thus posing a serious threat to our indigenous theatre. Apart from A. G. Rai-Chaudhury who wrote his play *Bandini Bharatmata* (1904) to meet this challenge, J. P. Agarwalla tried to meet the challenge by sheer excellence of his play *Sonit Konwari* (1924) and Atul Hazarika by sheer number of his plays. From this standpoint, Hazarika's contribution is significant. His mythological plays are *Narakasur* (1930), *Beula* (1933), *Nanda dulal* (1935), *Kurushetra* (1936), *Ramchandra* (1937), *Champavati*, *Sakuntala*, *Savitri* (1939), *Rukmini haran* (1949) and *Nirjita* (1952). We must not forget that this playwright wrote primarily for the stage in order to stem the inroad of Bengali *yatra* theatre; that is why one finds the spectacular pronounced in him. In *Narakasur*, fate dominates in the manner of *deus ex machina*. In *Beula*, the dialogue is declamatory; this becomes palpable when this drama is compared with Kamakhya Thakur's *Beula*, published in the same year. In *Rukmini haran*, the *vidusak* is modelled on the Shakespearean fool.

Hazarika could make his people talk naturally, although at times on a high pitch to suit stage needs. He could give plausibility to a plot, although it very often than not looks disjointed at first sight. Hazarika could hit off an atmosphere vibrant with mythical incredibility. His dialogues are crisp and declamatory at times; his diction is conversationally fluent, characters are convincing and dramas mythologically true to the tip.

Noted for lyricism and psychological interpretation of character and situation, J. P. Agarwalla's *Sonit Konwari* (1924) is a masterpiece of its kind. Devoid of tardy sentimentalism, it is a romantic comedy of love based on the legendary episode of Usha and Aniruddha. The conflict of passion in the drama rests on the conflict of circumstances and characters and not so much, as opined by our scholars, on the "two cross themes, a fit rival for

Bana and a worthy lover for Usha". T. G. Williams points out that the theatre is "an orchestration of a number of distinct arts". One of these is stage technique which Agarwalla, creator of our romantic drama, knew well; the much needed cooperation of the audience with the author was thus assured through developed stage technique, the *forte* of this playwright.

Some other mythological plays of which mention may be made are *Abasan*, *Chitrangada* and *Savitri* by K. N. Bhattacharjya, *Bisarjan* (1933) and *Nal Damayanti* (1956) by Ananda Barua, *Sakunir pratisodh* (1939) by Gonesh Gogoi, *Rakshyakumar* by L. D. Chaudhury, *Karna* and *Lakshman* (1949) by Suren Saikia and *Mahavir Karna* by Bhaben Thakuria. Robust in dialogue and dramatic poise, Gogoi's *Sakunir pratisodh* is a great stage success. Sakuni is an Iago type character; his diabolical role is chiselled out aptly. L. D. Chaudhury's *Rakshyakumar* is structurally a balanced play; what pervades its atmosphere, despite the violent clash of purpose succinctly brought out into relief, is spiritual understanding of a deeper dimension.

From 1940, possibly due to (i) compelling preoccupation with the problems of day-to-day life, and (ii) development of a more rational attitude, mythological dramas are progressively on the decline. Most of the mythological dramas published during the post-war period are earlier compositions. What these playwrights have achieved is that they have transformed the art of drama into an impassioned and serious experience; they have on no occasion failed in the imaginative presentation of moving incidents and capturing of the mythical atmosphere with skill and craftsmanship. Employment of the technique of opposite and irreconcilable forces, a masterly device which Shakespeare discovered from his own experience, had come to enrich the technical quality of our serious drama.

From mythology to history is but a short step. In our dramatic literature, the two moved *pari passu* and the characteristics of the one apply *mutatis mutandis* to the other. The playwrights of this *genre* turned the raw materials of history into imaginative forms and redeemed them with poetry; verse was primarily used, but

no such rigid convention was ever laid down. Of course the fact that serious dramas needed heightened language which is naturally verse was admitted. Verse suits mythological better than it suits historical dramas, for, the latter is nothing but tangible facts. This can be illustrated by the growth and development of P. N. Gohain-Barua's mind and art: his first three historical dramas *Joymati* (1900), *Gadadhar* (1908) and *Sadhani* (1911) are written in verse; the last *Lachit Barphukan* (1916), another historical drama, is written in prose. Atul Hazarika uses verse for mythological and prose for historical plays.

"A sympathetic interest in history", Brandes says, "is the result of refreshed interior life". Interest in history is an inspiring aspect of the romantic ideal that influenced our literature of the British period; it was further sharpened by political conditions of dependence. Our historical dramas emerged during the closing decade of the 19th century. P. N. Gohain-Barua's *Joymati* (1900), a tragic story, is the first historical drama in our language. The author captures aptly the "bustle and action" of history, yet then, the drama suffers from superfluity and fails to rise to acknowledged tragic heights. *Lachit Barphukan* is a faithful record of history; the characters are stagey. The author succeeds better in his non-historical sub-plots and falters whenever he tries to interpret history. To be brief, Gohain-Barua had neither the sense of historical perspective nor the capacity to impart dynamism to the cold facts of history by action, dialogue and character delineation.

Like Ben Jonson resorting to Roman history in *Sejanus*, L. N. Bezbarua, a noted writer of light comedies, resorted to Ahom chronicles for his serious dramas. His historical dramas are *Chakradhvaj Singha*, *Joymati Konwari* and *Belimar* (all in 1915). These dramas show considerable Shakespearean influence in comic interludes and characterisation by contrast. In *Chakradhvaj Singha*, Prince Hall and Falstaff are recreated through Priyaram, irresponsible and care-free like the former and Gajpuria, crafty and bland like the latter; these resemblances are but superficial. Gajpuria may best be described as dexterous and mock-

heroic whose attitude to life is forensic; to be precise, he is not a "synthetic character" like Falstaff.

Bezbarua's *Joymati Konwari* is a marked improvement on his own *Chakradhvaj Singha*. Dalimi, a Naga girl, whose spiritual identification with mountains and streams, birds and flowers of her native land is itself a poem, is his immortal creation. Compared to her, Jinu, a Naga girl in Gohain-Barua's *Joymati* is not only poetically sterile, but also an evidence of the real falling far short of the ideal. In this drama, Bezbarua is at his best in dialogue and characterisation. The canvas of *Belimar* that shows not only the decline of a ruling dynasty due to vicious internecine strife, but also the "sunset" of freedom for a people is wide; it treats four principal historical characters with equal depth and insight. To be brief, Bezbarua's world is a world of situation; occasionally even speech as in *Joymati Konwari* tended to become a spectacle.

Other historical dramas are *Vidyapati* (1918) and *Pratap Singha* (1926) by Saila Rajkhowa, *Mulagabharu* (1924) by R. K. Handique, *Nilambar* by P. Chaudhury, *Badan Barphukan* (1927), *Chandrakanta Singha* (1931) and *Bidrohi Moran* (1938) by Nakul Bhuyan, *Satir tej* (1931) by D. Kalita and *Naga Konwar* (1935) by K. N. Bhattacharjya. Bezbarua and Nakul Bhuyan are found to take liberty only with the minor characters they create; likewise, sub-plots in most of these plays, generally unconnected with history, show "invention" and originality; besides the conflict in situation and character is aptly brought out with an eye to the demands of drama and verisimilitude of history.

Two other successful playwrights of this generation are Daiba Talukdar and Atul Hazarika. Talukdar has to his credit *Asom prativa* (1924), *Bamuni Konwar* (1929), *Haradatta* (1935) and *Bhaskar Varma* (1952). *Asom prativa* can be described as a spectacle play; it depicts a gallery of portraits of historical personalities like Narayan and Chilarai, Sankardeva and Damodardeva—the first two symbolise political regeneration and the other two religious reformism. The play is not well-knit and by its very nature technically weak. Slightly melodramatic, Talukdar is non-sentimental

in his historical portraits. Written primarily as a shadow or pantomime-play, Parag Chaliha's *Chari hazar basar Asom* (1952) may also be described as a spectacle play; its canvas is poetically convincing.

Atul Hazarika has these historical plays to his credit: *Chhatrapati Shivaji* (1927), *Kanauj Konwari* (1933), *Birangana* (1952) and *Trikendrajit* (1959). Of these, from the point of the architectonics of style, *Chhatrapati Shivaji* is the author's best. Hazarika's characters are mostly boldly drawn extroverts; his dramatic craftsmanship lies in his mastery over antithesis and contrast. The playwright's gaze is limited to the circumference and not to the soul of history; when he tries to escape from this limitation, he does so with a certain measure of plausibility. Dramatists of the type of Pajiruddin Ahmed looked beyond the frontiers of local history for inspiration and thus widened the horizon of thematic material for drama. Ahmed's *Gulnar* (1924) and *Sindhu vijay* (1928) may be mentioned as instances in this connection. From the point of dramatic situation and characterisation, the latter is not as telling and lively as the former. From the point of story also, it is insipid.

This must be noted that though historical and mythological plays are commonly accepted as spring-boards of patriotism which they re-define in larger terms, the primary motive of these playwrights was larger than re-definition of patriotism. To them must go the credit of building a drama tradition in the modern context as also of initiating a theatre movement under changed conditions. While the Vaishnava theatre, mostly open-air, had the village *namghar* for its venue, the modern theatre needed certain technical adjuncts that were not available in the *namghar*. The Vaishnava drama is religious while the modern drama is secular, Anglo-Indian in inspiration, and that is why a prayer hall like the *namghar* could not naturally accommodate it.

Although there are tragic sequences in some of the dramas, tragedy in its proper emotional and aesthetic context has not grown in our literature. It is difficult to write, in the strict sense of the term, a tragedy on social themes; even so powerful a play as

Galsworthy's *Justice* is merely a tragic symbol of social malaise and not a tragedy proper. For tragedy proper, one has to depend primarily on historical or mythological subject. A tragic hero rides the tide of events and stimulates "pity and terror". Although planned to be a tragedy, the hero in Daiba Talukdar's *Bamuni Konwar*, Taokhamti, buffeted about by individual attitudes, does not have the necessary sublimity capable of effecting catharsis of emotions. What we find, for instance, in *Joymati Konwari*, *Bamuni Konwar* or *Sadhani* is mere predilection for pathos rather than for sterner tragic effects. A tragedy is not merely a "sentimental play of tears". The only two dramas that show tragic qualities to a certain extent are of the post-war period: *Maniram Dewan* by Pravin Phukan and *Piali Phukan* of Nowgong Dramatic Club. The heroes of these dramas show a certain tragic firmness and idealism of character, capable of exciting pity and passion, men beyond whom there is the omnipotence of circumstances to victimise them.

Historical dramas of the post-war period like *Maniram Dewan*, *Piali Phukan*, *Kusal Konwar*, *Labhita*, *Trikendrajit*, *Tirhot Singh*, *Rajdrohi*, *Bhogjara* etc. have proved popular; most of them deal with the history of British times. Over and above this, a new process of experimentation started initially during the forties has helped to widen the frontiers of the new drama into meaningful forms, viz., symbolic, poetic, social, political, psycho-analytical, allegorical etc. It is the younger generation of playwrights who have attuned themselves to this new impact with gusto. What is significant about this new group is that the technique adopted by them is more naturalistic; atleast melodrama is largely eliminated. Although of non-opera type, the technique adopted by the older group of playwrights was to intersperse their dramas with too many songs; except giving entertainment to the people, these songs served no dramatic purpose. It is in *Sonit Konwari* alone that they are used as a dramatic device. In the post-war theatre, there is a marked decline of songs as an integral part of the drama; its place is taken by background music which is an adjunct of the theatre and not of the drama.

It is J. P. Agarwalla who for the first time made dialogue artfully articulate, gave it variety and understanding flash, depth of idea and feeling. This can be said that like James Elroy Flecher, this playwright also won brilliant success by the dramatic employment of poetical prose. The dialogues of *Maniram Dewan* and *Piali Phukan* are of a developed standard; they are not only an embellishment in the dramatic sense, but politically significant also. The credit of making dialogue dramatically articulate goes initially to J. P. Agarwalla. The playwrights of the time were seeking freedom from verse and in the process some of them lapsed into a prose that was hard and terse. From his own experience, Agarwalla discovered a medium, subsequently implemented effectively by young playwrights like Satyaprasad Barua and others, that suited the new idiom best. Thus the tradition of an effective syntax and an expressive language was established, in the process of which the stern sequence of cause and effect was made to acquire a new meaning.

Pravin Phukan's *Maniram Dewan* (1948), a three-Act play, has sharp and incisive dialogue and balanced development of the denouement that is climaxed in the emotionally packed four scenes of the last Act. *Lachit Barphukan* (1948) by the same author has dramatic suspense and well-developed characters, most of whom are aptly fitted into the perspective of patriotic courage that is "crimson splendour". Whether in the architectonics of style or chiselled phrasing or delineation of emotionally vibrant character or situation, *Piali Phukan* (1948) of the Nowgong Dramatic Club is a class by itself. The drama has no Act-divisions; seven different series of events culminate in the tragically intense final scene. *Piali Phukan* is existentialist in essence. Suren Sainia's *Kusal Konwar* (1949) is a topical drama of martyrdom of an individual, whose name the play bears, during the 1942 struggle for freedom; technically, the play is on a lower key. Although dialogues have a tendency to over-step limits, Atul Hazarika's *Trikendrajit* (1959) reveals unity of insight and balanced development of story. Abdul Malik's *Rajdrohi* (1958) seeks to give a new interpretation to the historical character of Satram against the

background of a modern idiom, *i.e.*, people's revolution; technically, it is not a well-designed play. On the other hand, *Bhogjara* (1957) that depicts Tipamia Gohain, a feudal chieftain and the Ahom King Lakshminath Singha (1769-1780) in strife, is more imaginatively planned in character, stage effect and dialogue. This drama is by Phani Sarma.

(iii) *Social and other Dramas :*

Analysis of contemporary social and domestic life is a popular *motif* with our younger playwrights. This trend is the offshoot of a growing middle class whose virtues and problems are both domestic and social. Whatever that maybe, this trend must not be confused with indulgence, as of the romanticists, in private emotions. This type of drama can be divided into two broad categories: (i) domestic dramas of the type of Arthur Jones and Arthur Pinero, and (ii) social dramas that depict political or socio-economic problems or conflict between society and individuals of the Ibsenian type. The situations arise inevitably from the interplay of characters and the denouement is not forced; it is the inevitable sequence and conclusion of the logistics of cause and effect and the tensions that are set up. This trend towards naturalism must have been the result of a psychological reaction against insipid sentimental comedies and so-called romantic tragedies of exaggerated pathos and refinement.

These social dramas are generally marked by an economy of scenes and Acts; their characters are not presented as handmaids of Fate; they might be the victims of social forces, but, broadly speaking, they are their own destiny. These characters are social beings in the sense that they represent social ideas and impulses; even their misfortunes are the results of social causes finding expression either by way of response or reaction.

This must be said that our pioneer domestic drama was written by N. C. Bardoloi of the past generation; it is *Griha Lakshmi* (1911). This drama describes the sufferings of a woman whose husband is a profligate. Likewise, G. K. Barua's *Uma* depicts a contrast between two women, Sumitra, disruptive in her conduct

and Uma who applies the ointment of understanding on the ulcer of family life. Strictly speaking, Lakshmi Sarma's *Nirmala* (1926) is not a domestic drama. It is the story of a widow who commits suicide due to social obduracy.

Though located in a mythopoetic environment, J. P. Agarwalla's *Karengar ligiri* (1934) is, from the point of technique, one of our best domestic tragedies of the romantic type. Certain incidents in the drama hinge on the borderline of incredibility; possibly that is why the writer has given it a mythopoetic environment. Each one of the main characters, Sundarkonwar, Kanchankumari and Sewali are psychoanalytic symbols; the dramatic action opens up moribund layers of human consciousness into aesthetic experience. Agarwalla like Ibsen has restored literature to the theatre and exposed the vacuity of the melodrama.

Agarwalla's *Rupalim* (written in 1936), the scene of which is located in an imaginary atmosphere amidst north-eastern tribal life, is a tragic story of romantic love. Suresh Goswami's *Runumi* (1946) is a drama of a similar type. For such idealistic plots, Goswami and Agarwalla set their scenes in remote regions and with deft imagination gave to them an atmosphere of stern realism. *Rupalim* is psychological in approach, a drama where mere sensual love is controlled by intellectual realisation as one comes across in the character of Manimugdha. Agarwalla's *Labhita* (1948) is a powerful socio-political play written against the background of cataclysmic social conditions generated by the last War. *Labhita*, a young village girl, is an inspiring representative of the popular will to resist, a will that was stimulated by the '42 spirit; besides, she is a victim of the hell-fire let loose by the War. A commonplace story, Atul Hazarika's *Ahuti* is also written against the background of the '42 movement for freedom. D. Sarma's *Kon bate* (1962) has captured not only the spirit of the social forces of the time, but also reflected them adequately. Atul Hazarika's *Kalyani* (1939) is of a different cast; in it, the influence of Gandhian renaissance is clearly evident. Hazarika is noted for ingenuity rather than originality.

Pravin Phukan's *Kalparinay* has already been referred to.

His other social dramas are *Dr. Promod*, *Satikar ban* (1954) and *Bisvarupa* (1961). Phukan's is a socially conscious mind; anything in society, a mood or an attitude, that seeks to violate established norms disturbs his sensitive mind. In a characteristic cynical vein, the playwright exposes in *Satikar ban* the acquisitive tendencies of individuals and by contrast brings into focus basically good characters like Ananta, Srikanta and Rupahi; the situation is domestic, but the impact is social. Phukan knows how to develop artistic concept with imaginative consistency.

Satyaprasad Barua, a serious playwright of the younger generation, approximates to a certain extent J. P. Agarwalla in some significant aspects—depth of insight and idiom, psychology and intellectual approach. His dramas are *Chakaichakuwa* (1939), *Sikha* (1957) and *Jyoti Rekha* (1958). Thematically romantic, these dramas present psycho-analytic probe into character, which James Joyce used to describe as the “innermost flickering of the human heart”. Behind every human act there is an idea, intellectual or psychological,—this fact is skilfully telescoped into a focus in Barua's dramas through character study and significant dialogue. Complicated in plot-structure, Nagen Sarma's *Ulkar Jui* (1961) is a powerful socio-psychological drama; the playwright's insight into socio-psychological forces is refreshingly new and dramatically intense.

In the use of rural and lower middle class urbanised idiom, Sarada Bardoloi is unique. His plays are *Magribar ajan* (1950), *Pahila tarikh* (1956) and *Ae batedi* (1957). A drama of social realism, the first is a living portrait of rural idealism as reflected in the character of Karim and Lathau. *Pahila tarikh* is a realistic snapshot, with an undertone of irony and agony, of lower middle class life. S. Chakravartty's *Abhiman* (1952) and *Kankan* (1956) are domestic studies of chiselled emotional conflict. In the first, the playwright employs successfully the flashback technique popularised by the celluloid world. The two brothers, Anil and Girish Chaudhury are gifted young playwrights; they possess technical skill and insight into character and situation. *Prativad* (1953) is a psychological story by the first and *Minabazar* (1958),

an agonising appraisal of socio-economic conditions of the poor by the latter. Another drama of this *genre* is A. Pathak's *Interview* (1955). Other dramas of this generation are D. Barthakur's *Chaknoiya*, Phani Sarma's *Kiya* (1960), Premnarayan Datta's *Satkar* and *Kantharol* (1950), Abhoy Deka's *Gara-khahania* (1955) and Prafulla Barua's *Asar balichar* (1954). In inspiration, the last one is of the nature of Ernst Toller's *The Machine and the Man*.

Besides these social realists, there is another group of playwrights whose *forte* is poetic romance. These playwrights are aesthetically selective and poetically passionate, but unlike the social realists, they are not ethically oblique. The poetic and symbolic dramas are : K. Chaliha's *Dhuli*, Kirti and Mukti Bardoloi's *Sur vijay*, Luit Konwar, *Meghawali* etc., Ananda Barua's *Kapau Konwari*, Badan Sarma's *Kavitar janma*, *Heimantika* etc., and Parvati Barua's *Lakhimi* and *Sonar solang* (1929). *Sonar solang* is symbolic like Maeterlink's *The Blue Bird*. In the words of W. B. Yeats, these plays might be described as "plays for drums and zithers", for, the intrinsic character of these dramas is musical and operatic. In brief, these dramas seek to provide the "nourishment" on which, to use the words of Synge, "our imaginations live".

One-Act plays and radio-dramas are modern experiments in our literature. Joseph T. Shipley describes the one-Act play thus : "The usual one-Act piece is to the play as the short story is to the novel; it can stress but one aspect: character, action, background, emotion, of the many in a full and rounded work." Although L. N. Bezbarua's light comedies like *Nomal*, *Pachani* etc. are one-Act plays, the real path-finder of the modern one-Act play is Lakshmi Sarma's *Prajapatir bhul*, first published in the *Awahon* during the thirties of the century. Since then, there has been a spate of these dramas; they have come to enrich our literature with a new idiom. Tafazul Ali, H. C. Bhattacharjya, Bina Barua, S. P. Barua, Mahendra Bora, Homen Bargohain, Jogen Chetia, Satish Das, Bnaben Saikia, D. K. Saikia and Kiran Sarma have definitely made a mark in this field of drama. Bina Barua's *Abelar nat*, a psychological study of two cross-currents and Pravin

Phukan's *Tritaranga*, an anthology of three social plays, have stabilised this experiment into an ennobling experience.

The radio drama in our literature has made its debut with the establishment of the Gauhati station of the All India Radio in 1948. The art of the radio drama is defined by Joseph T. Shipley thus: "The absence of visual element compels the writer to be economical with characters, so that they can be easily distinguished. This in turn forces him to employ comparatively simple plots." Radio dramas like *Bhogjara*, *Jonakir biya*, *Adha aka chhabi*, *Jinti*, *Malati*, *Era batar sur*, *Ghatoal* etc. have added to the compass of our dramatic literature.

Although it does not come within any of these categories, Phani Talukdar's *Juiyepora son* (1963) written against the background of recent Chinese aggression is a class by itself. In presentation of plot and technical finish, in delineation of character and situation, it has its own distinctive charm.

In summing up, this can be said that since people today generally seek emotional satisfaction in cinemas rather than in plays, the social outlook as such is not so encouraging for the growth of drama. Broadly speaking, the problem is, however, different with us. Despite the growth in our dramatic literature, no permanent theatre has yet grown in our State. "No play is complete", Robert Speaight rightly remarks, "until it is performed". Occasional amateur performances do not help to create a theatre and without the active cooperation of an institution as permanent theatre, no drama can grow and thrive. The one grows with the other and this interdependent growth helps to sustain both. The question that might naturally be asked here is: "Do you judge a play by literary standards or those of the footlights?" My answer will be: "By both."

THE BAPTIST Missionaries wanted to propagate religion through literature. To achieve this end, they took to prose and verse both and thus effected a significant departure from the largely accepted medium of the Vaishnava age which was verse only. With a view to disseminate the ideas of Christian piety, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) was chosen for translation; some parts of it were serialised in the *Oronodoi* during 1851. The Assamese version of it is known as *Jatrikar jatra*; with this creative fiction, novel writing, slowly but steadily, came into vogue in our language.

This literary work of John Bunyan, who was himself a Baptist and on whose writing the influence of the Bible is most pronounced, found a ready response in the Baptist Missionaries of the *Oronodoi* circle working in Assam. It is said that the "evangelists" with flowing narrative and the colloquial ease and force of parabolic teaching meet us in almost every page of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Peter Westland). Besides its style, vivid, simple and terse, characteristics evident in *Oronodoi* writings, had its own appeal to the unlettered and the cultured alike. Whatever that may be, it would, however, be wrong to suppose that the translated version of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is the first novel in Assamese or anything approximating that. At best, it is a religious allegory in prose that depicts the "progress of every Christian soul, with its aspira-

tions, its struggles, its weaknesses, its recoveries, along the path of life”.

A. C. Ward describes *The Pilgrim's Progress* on the other hand as the “lonely instance of a Christian novel which, as literature, is not inferior to the great secular novels”. He says further: “Here for the first time in English imaginative prose, the characters possess the vital third dimension: they have depth, they step away from the background.” This can be said that to *Jatrikar jatra*, noted for its purposeful appraisal of character and situation, the Assamese novel of the succeeding period must have owed a certain debt. *Jatrikar jatra* was circumscribed in its influence; nevertheless, both as a piece of imaginative prose and fiction, it is historically significant.

Another Christian theme, the *Kani-beharuar sadhu* (1876) has for its story a Scottish background. Its central idea is the monolithic Christian doctrine, according to which salvation lies solely in Christ. The search for wild birds' eggs as represented by the central figure of the story is symbolic of man's search for mundane pleasures. Buffeted by the wearisome search, the hero finds solace and security ultimately in Christ; the story is of the type of a popular parable. Thus, the social theme for fiction with a religious *motif* caught on. Translated by A. K. Gurney of the Baptist Mission, *Elokeshi baishyar bisay*, a novelette originally in Bengali by Miss M. E. Lesley, was published in Assamese in 1877. The focus was on our social environment. It depicts conflict in a girl widow's life beguiled into evil ways by designing persons. Ultimately she is saved from this social cesspool by a nun who ordains her into the Christian faith. From the technical standpoint, there is a concerted effort in this work at character portrayal and plot development that projects social conditions at their degrading worst.

Kaminikanta (1877) by A. K. Gurney is a significant Christian novel. This is a story of the desertion of original faith by a Bengali youth, Kaminikanta, who wanted to embrace Christianity and the natural mental torment suffered by his wife, Sarala. Through the intervention of a common friend of the family, Narendra, there is a

steady exchange of epistles between the husband and the wife,—the former recounting the virtues of Christianity and the latter protesting till at last she herself is converted to Christianity together with the common friend of the family, Narendra and his wife, Hemangi. The propaganda motive is so strong in this work that it relegates most of the basic considerations of aesthetics into the background. That the characters belong to the highest echelon of Hindu society, *i.e.*, the Brahmins is meaningful: the rational spirit of Christianity could penetrate even into the strongest citadel of Hindu orthodoxy. The end depicts the natural prosperity of Kaminikanta, a fact that seeks to carry the impression that the acceptance of Christian faith is not only spiritually ennobling, but economically rewarding also.

A work of fiction or novel is not cried down either for its subject-matter or the idea that it seeks to unfold or propagate, provided it does not distort or throw overboard the basic concepts of a novel. In the traditional sense, the requisites are : (i) the novelist's creative power, (ii) the power to tell a story, (iii) the power to make characters live, and (iv) a certain balanced plot-development. *Kaminikanta* is the first story in Assamese to delineate socio-psychological tension through characterisation and necessary plot-construction; from this standpoint, it can easily be described as the first traditional novel in Assamese.

Originally written in Bengali by Mrs. Mullens of the Baptist Mission, Mrs. Gurney's *Phulmani aru Karuna* (1877), a story about women, is a work of translation. In her introductory note, Mrs. Mullens says :

It is a book specially intended for native Christian women. I have endeavoured to show in it the practical influence of Christianity on the various details of domestic life...The above subjects are woven into the title story, fictitious on the whole, but founded upon facts.

Although limited to a narrow dimension, this story is a departure in theme and thought. At the same time, one must remember that a novel is not merely a record of homilies and "various details

of domestic life" or other aspects of "life". The characters of the story do not live; they are like drainpipes fitted into Mrs. Mullens' fixed mental idiom. This work is devoid of any historical significance from the point of the development of our novel.

The perspective of Christian missionary writers was circumscribed, an admitted drawback against creation of anything ennobling either from the point of technique or aesthetics. Though the chosen theme of Christian fiction was generally social, the preponderance of religion diminished whatever social appeal they could be expected to have. To say that they are the first social novels in our language is incorrect. In between these Christian efforts appeared Padmavati Phukanani's *Sudharmar upakhyān* (1884), the first work of fiction by a woman. Uninitiated to the technique of novel writing, Phukanani's work remained a loosely-knit story of the *upakhyāna* type and did not have any impact on subsequent novels. Likewise, H. C. Barua's (1835-97) *Bahire rangchang bhitare kowabhaturi* is not a novel in the strict sense of the term. It is at best a fiction type prose essay with over-drawn characters and situation.

With P. N. Gohain-Barua and Rajani Bardoloi (1867-1939), the novel in the modern sense emerged; the theme of their novels was mainly historical and romantic. A touch of imagination was introduced into the closed precincts of history, and the novel, which is often described as "fictitious prose narrative in which characters and actions representative of real life are portrayed in a plot of more or less complexity" emerged during the nineties of the last century.

History is not a choreography of ossified moments. The success of a historical novel depends on the writer's capacity to absorb the spirit of the past imaginatively and to transmute it into reality; this creative resurrection of the past is only possible if the writer possesses a "dialectical understanding of reality" and also the capacity to identify himself with the swing and swirl of historical forces. The success of Gohain-Barua and Bardoloi as historical novelists lies in the fact of their mind being largely attuned to such a spirit. Gohain-Barua's *Bhanumati* was serialised in the *Bijoli* during 1890;

his *Lahori* was published in 1892. The setting of the first is the history of Moamaria revolution against Ahom rule and that of the second is Burmese invasion of Assam; the central theme in these works is youthful romance. The situations are made complex, a particular event cutting into another and thus confounding the issue. The characters are not complicated: storms toss them; nonetheless they show a certain dignity and discipline, poise and power to control events and forces at strife with one another. At the same time, events often prove too powerful, as in *Bhanumati*, to be controlled. The climax in this story is reached with Bhanumati seeking a watery grave like Shakespeare's Ophelia and the other woman-character Tara becoming a spiritual recluse. In *Lahori* there is an element of drama that gives it an animated sensationalism, but deprives it of artistic elegance. Though they are historical novels, history, except giving credence to the story, is seen only in dim perspective.

Rajani Bardoloi has popularised history in the picturesque; it is in his hands that the novel assumed its distinctive character. In those settled times after the vacation of Burmese occupation and the full-fledged consolidation of British rule in the land, history naturally gratified man's craving for more glamorous pictures of enchanted life; this is one of the reasons behind the popularity of historical themes both with the reader and the writer in those days. But the substance of history, except environment providing the setting of the story, was hardly touched upon; besides, except providing sentimental and emotional appraisal of history, there is no probe in the novels into the social motivations of political events.

As a novelist, Rajani Bardoloi drew his inspiration mainly from Sir Walter Scott and Bankim Chatterjee of Bengal. This he acknowledges in the preface to his novel *Dandowa droh* (1909). Except *Miri Jiyari* (1895), a romantic tale in a tribal social environment, the rest of his novels are historical-cum-romantic in inspiration. Powerful in appeal and tragic in denouement, *Miri Jiyari* enacts the sad love story of a Miri boy and girl, Jangki and Panei. Characters are few in the novel, but each one of them is developed

adequately in keeping with the tenets of aesthetic balance. Although *Miri Jiyari* is Bardoloi's first novel, it shows the qualities of the novelist in transparent grace. The narrative is graphic and the environment, particularly nature, is delineated with a passion. It won't be an exaggeration to say that *Miri Jiyari* embodies Bardoloi's yearning for a Rousseauite return to nature. The greatest technical blemish of the author, as evident from *Miri Jiyari* and *Rangili* (1925), is however his digressive departures unwarranted by compulsions of technique or aesthetics.

In his historical novels, Bardoloi mingled the authentic figures of history with those of his imagination and effectively buttressed romance with truth. Of these, *Manomati* (1900), a romantic story in the context of Burmese invasion, is the author's best. Historical events like the defeat of the Assamese garrisons in the hands of the Burmese at Hadirachaki are used as a backdrop for this romantic tale of two storm-tossed lovers. In the true *Romeo and Juliet* manner, the conflict between the two feudal families to which the lovers belonged is shown. *Manomati* belonged to the family of Chandi Barua, chieftain of Barnagar and her lover Lakshmikanta to that of another nobleman Halakanta Barua. In the romantic interlude, *Manomati*'s young friend Pamila and a mendicant Santiram play a significant role.

The plot of *Manomati* is a complex *tour de force* type; the denouement is a simple relieving solution. Both the pairs of lovers are united, *Manomati* with Lakshmikanta and Padumi with Santiram. Padumi, a helpless victim of Burmese vandalism, is an image of tragedy, but the way she conducts herself even in her saddest ordeal, taciturn and inward looking, intelligent and alert, is a tribute to womanhood in general. In portraying the character of *Manomati* and Pamila, Bardoloi must have drawn his inspiration from two mythopoetic prototypes, Usha and Chitrlekha. *Manomati* is Usha in love and Pamila Chitrlekha in her warmth of feelings and intelligent overtures. Even Santiram Bhakat addresses her as Chitrlekha: "Pamila, no, Chitrlekha you are. Won't it be possible for you, Chitrlekha, to put some one else in charge of this mission?" There is an element of sus-

pense in the novel. Apparently Santiram is carefree but underneath the exterior of his gay abandon there is an undefined agony, the springs of which are visible only towards the end.

To be brief, *Manomati* is a story of simple beauty told in a lucid, limpid language; sympathy is the keynote of Bardoloi as a novelist, sympathy for virtues and strength, petty weaknesses and foibles of his characters, all alike. The blemish, as evident in *Manomati*, is his unnecessary digression into rigmarole of man's socio-religious conduct, a thing that inevitably acts as a deterrent to precise aesthetic growth.

But for the streaks of spiritual light, *Rangili* (1925) is basically a novel of gloom. Unyielding in her idealism, the heroine is a symbol of patience and fortitude. The setting is one of Burmese invasion during the last decades of Ahom rule and of a society in its disintegrating phases. The character of Rangili, human and sublime, is a psychological projection of these social reflexes. With the death of her lover, Satram, she becomes a Vaishnava. Like Rangili, the heroine of *Rahdai Ligiri* also suffers incredibly due to corrupting court intrigues and antipathy, brought about by her love for a common youth, Dayaram, a fact that enflames royal wrath. Except that it is technically more developed, *Nirmal Bhakat* (1926) is thematically like any Christian novel of the *Oronodoi* type where the religious strain is pronounced; the story as it develops sharpens and does not overshadow it. Nirmal who was taken captive by the Burmese during their last invasion of Assam returns after a long span of years only to discover that a terrific change has overtaken the land. Even his own wife, Rupahi, had married their childhood playmate Aniram. Nirmal emerges in a new light; he does not disturb their conjugal happiness by disclosing his identity, but seeks solace in Vaishnavism.

All foreign invasions have a catalectic impact and so had the repeated Burmese invasions of Assam; this brought about a disintegrating social upheaval that stirred Bardoloi's responsive mind and intellect. Traditionalist by temperament, he sought to rejuvenate society according to Vaishnava spiritual tenets. Though primarily a romantic story, in *Tamreswari mandir* (1936) there is a

conflict between two trends of religious thought, Tantrism and Vaishnavism, the latter ultimately triumphing over the former. In contrast to it, *Dandowa droh* (1909) may be described as a political novel that pivots round the peasants' revolt of 1880 against the Ahom viceroy of Gauhati, Badanchandra; Haradatta and Biradatta provided the leadership in this revolt; the one died fighting and the other was court-martialled in captivity. Interwoven into this setting of war is a love-story that redeems history with a romantic appeal. In Bardoloi's hands, women characters generally enjoy a more illuminating focus. His other two novels are *Radha Rukmini* (1925) and *Khamba aru Thaibi*. Noted for its tragic intensity, the latter is a romantic story based on a legendary episode of Manipur.

To sum up: (i) Bardoloi's novels are an imaginative re-creation of history that does not prevaricate or distort the basic perspective, (ii) Bardoloi has a basic concept about society that enflames his consciousness as a writer throughout, (iii) Bardoloi's writings are inspired with a spirit of patriotism, romantic at its exuberant best. He loves nature, hills and dales, rivers and streams, because of their inherent romantic possibility. He loves history because it is romantically attractive. He loves abnormal situations, war and rebellion, because they enflame romantic imagination. He loves women because they are symbols of pristine grace and beauty. (iv) Bardoloi's *forte* lies chiefly in the development of situations in which desperate women face crisis and resolve it without however denying or suppressing their deepest feeling and with natural candour, intelligence and dynamism of spirit. (v) Bardoloi's characters are not princes and potentates; they are mostly humble folks with their tiny joys and sorrows.

The strength of Bardoloi's technique lies in his plot construction and character study. He loves sensationalism for it added rhythm to the sinews of his stories. There is conflict in his novels, but it is formalistic and keyed to a set pattern. The initial years of the novel that synchronised with the life-work of Gohain-Barua and Bardoloi are marked by a certain development of social consciousness, the result of which was the growth of satire and exploitation

of historical materials for story purposes. Often the novel is described as a "twin sister" of the drama, for, it is equally privileged to arouse deep and strong emotions. A certain element of drama is present in the novels of both Gohain-Barua and Bardoloi. Despite skill in other literary avenues, L. N. Bezbarua attained no significant success as a novelist nor did his only novel *Padumkumari* (1905) on a similar theme as Bardoloi's *Dandowa droh* (1909) hold out any promise.

The vital spring of literary enthusiasm of the twenties and thirties was the resurgence of ideas and impulse produced by our freedom movement; all-embracing in character, it quickened national life condemned to stagnation under foreign rule and released new social ideas and sense of literary values. Dandi Kalita whose *Sadhana* (1938) is a departure from the historical trend initiated by Gohain-Barua and Bardoloi is a pioneer in the field of social novel. In 1908 Kalita first tried his hand at the historical novel. This work *Phul* is an evidence of immaturity.

Sadhana depicts two parallel sets of characters, one dedicated to selfless social work and the other professing only lip loyalty to the cause. Spiritually devoted to the cause, the hero, Dinabandhu, symbolises an idealism that is nourished by new social thinking. Although emancipation has given Rambha an opportunity, true idealism deludes her. In contrast to her, there are two gentle and strong-willed women-characters, Prabha and Usha, to whom dedication to a cause is an article of faith. Though in characterisation and conflict of impulses *Sadhana* attains considerable success, the work is not without technical blemish. It is true that certain sensational suspense adds edge to a novel as to a drama, but when it is sought to be over-dramatised through plot-manoeuvre, much of the creative poise of a literary work is either lost or distorted. The weakest spot of the story is its end which is melodramatic. Kalita's *Abishkar* (1950) is a social novel with a powerful theme marred by poorer perception. His other novels are *Parichay* (1950) and *Gana-viplav* (1951). Set in the context of the Moamaria revolution against Ahom oligarchy, the latter is a historical novel; the narrative is poor and does not show

any of the promise held out earlier. Kalita's art is monographic. To him, characters are either good or bad and in between these two broad divisions, there is no room for an intermediate type.

If the impact of Gandhian renaissance touched only the fringe of Kalita's psychology, it was fundamental with Daiba Talukdar. His novels *Dhuwali Kuwali* (1922), *Apurna*, *Agneyagiri* (1924), *Vidrohi* (1939) and *Adarshapith* are mostly snapshots of the tone and temper of the time. Despite overburdening moral didacticism, Talukdar sets a tradition of social probe in his novels. This idealism is projected through the hero of *Adarshapith*, a man who symbolises social consciousness and seeks to fashion society into a new framework. What had remained unfulfilled in *Apurna* due to the hero Premadhar's death finds an extension in *Agneyagiri*; the central figure Kanak is a Gandhian radicalist who throws splinters on the painted veil of social customs, for, they are sham and irrational. This theme finds a further expression in *Vidrohi*. Thematically, Talukdar has widened the scope of the novel; it is as a soothing teller of story that he is handicapped, particularly because of his disjointed style and over-exuberance of design; mere propaganda in the guise of art cannot replace the demands of aesthetics.

In spite of Kalita and Talukdar, our novel after Rajani Bardoloi did not make any significant headway till the forties and the succeeding decade of this century. True it is that attempts were made by writers proficient mainly in other literary avenues like Sarat Goswami (*Panipath*, 1930), Santiram Das (*Vairagi*, 1921), H. N. Datta-Barooa (*Chitra Darshan*, 1930) and Sneha Bhattacharjya (*Bina*, 1926), but none of them could register any significant progress, perhaps because they lacked that absorbing passion which a specialised branch of literary art as the novel needed. Except Kalita's *Sadhana* and Dina Sarma's *Usha*, serialised in the *Awahon* during 1938, these years are lean in novel. *Usha* is a romantic story that marks a deviation from pre-occupation with social and historical themes of the years preceding.

Bina Barua's *Jivana: Batat* (1945) has introduced a refreshing breeze into the limited canvas of our novel. This novel is noted for its graphic probe into the tiny joys and sorrows of the man in

the masses and for rural vignettes and environment. Both Tagar and Kamali are lovely feminine characters; the compelling interest of the story lies in the fascination they weave. Around a simple theme, the author weaves a wide texture of village life, some of the snapshots of which are vivid and vibrant like cinematographic portraits. There is a conflict of circumstances and the reaction of characters thereto is in a remote way psychological. The story is humanistic in appeal and dynamic in character and environment. The "strategic conclusion" of the story is, however, blatantly conventional, a medieval romance-type device.

It is encouraging to note that our novel has registered an inspiring progress during and after the last War. This is the period when the rural compromise of our life was experiencing a steady dissolution due to uncertain and unstable conditions created by the War. From pre-occupation of writers in rural themes during this period, as in *Jivanar Batat*, it won't be wrong to suppose that there was an attempt to capture scenes and experiences before they were consigned into oblivion. Yet, the years were sterile from the literary point of view. This stifling effect on creative work was the natural outcome of the sense of insecurity and instability generated by war conditions. With the threat of war receding after Hiroshima, new signs of life became visible. The post-War social consciousness, the edge of which was chiselled by the people's movement of 1942, was created principally by a monthly journal called *Jayanti* (1943) under the editorship of K. N. Dev. Once the enthusiasm was created, it caught on and literature took upon itself the task of reflecting this spirit of rejuvenation.

The problem of poverty and social injustice dominates Md. Piar's inspiration. His novels are *Priti-upahar* (1947), *Sangram* (1948), *Marahapapari*, *Jivan noir janji* (1949), *Harowa swarga* (1952) and *Hyphen* (1959); the last one is an abridged edition of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Other novels of the period with socio-economic problems as themes are Dina Sarma's *Sangram*, Jamiruddin's *Samaj sanghat sangram*, Mathura Deka's *Humuniyah*, Saumer's *Keranir kapal* etc. Though their contribution to the popularity of the social novel is undeniable, the appraisal of socio-economic

problems in these novels is photographic rather than psychoanalytic.

The initial years of the post-War panorama are Md. Piar's years. His *Sangram*, auto-biographical in a large measure, brings into focus the problems of lower middle class society that believes neither in resignation to the will of God nor submits to social and economic injustices, but struggles on bravely with a will to overcome defeat. The central figure of the novel Rafique symbolises such a spirit. *Harowa swarga* is identical in spirit and in reaction to hostile circumstances. Md. Piar's language is graphic, although vituperative at times. His characters are intrepid human beings. No ideological bias of a political type disturbs Md. Piar's social pen-portraits and that is why they are free from dogma and rancour.

Except for Dina Sarma's *Nadai* that depicts an idealised portrait of village life with a passion for the "good earth" and its lyrical sensibilities, the bias for lower middle class life is pronounced in the novels of this period. Slightly reminiscent of Pearl Buck's *Good Earth*, *Nadai* represents conflict between two trends of thought, one of *status quoism* represented by Nadai and the other, a radical one, by his sons. Sarma's *Sangram* depicts life in a small town where the central figure of the story, Buddhinath, is a sojourner; his defeat is not the defeat of an ideal, it is a defeat imposed by conscience. *Santi* is a story of urbanised life and the situation, despite brilliant character study at places, is unnecessarily complicated with incidents and events, digressions and details. *Santi* compares unfavourably with Sarma's own earlier creations, *Nadai* and *Sangram*.

Hitesh Deka's natural talents for objective appraisal find a better expression in the depiction of rural life, problems of peasantry, imbalances imposed by extraneous forces, land hunger of interested people etc. His *Ajir Manuh* (1952) and *Mati kar* (1958) are realistic portraits of problems; in a sense, the latter is a political tract with a programme in the guise of a story. His two other novels are *Bharaghar* (1957) and *Aeyatu Jivan* (1962). The first of these two depicts problems of lower middle class society. To be brief, Deka's popularity rests on the story itself rather than on

any technical skill or sensitive appraisal of character and situation. Like Dina Sarma, he too has failed in his subsequent novels to achieve even his own standard established in *Ajir Manuh*. In point of lively exposition of peasant life, Ghana Gogoi's *Sonar Nangal* is a successful work. Though the story is absorbing and has an elemental force, his *Bhumi Kanya* (1962) is a hybridisation of two trends, rural and urban; the idyllic beauty of rural idiom is oddly affected by the introduction of urbanised jargon. The end of the story, although gripping, is melodramatic in the most extraordinary sense.

Elaborate in diction, P. D. Rajkhowa's *Bhular Samadhi* is a story of characters delineated against a wide canvas of pre-War problems. The writer is ruthless in his appraisal. Unlike Vivek of R. M. Goswami's *Chaknoiya*, the hero of Rajkhowa's novel suffers from no morbid self-appraisal or despair born of futility. Era and Mira are two fine women characters. Premnarayan Datta's success in detective novels, it is true, has deterred serious critics from granting him attention. But the fact remains that the note of seriousness and of raillery, of tenderness and of laughter blend in full accord in whatever he writes, no matter how trivial or insipid the theme might be. His notable detective novels are *Dindakait* (1947) and *Ramtangun* (1950). His novels are *Niyatir Nirmali* and *Pranayar suti*. Datta gives substance and verisimilitude to strangely incoherent situations; his laughter is invariably unobtrusive.

1954 witnessed two noteworthy novels of social study: R. M. Goswami's *Chaknoiya* and Naba Barua's *Kapiliparia sadhu*; this was followed by Jogesh Das's *Dawar aru nai* (1955). One of the striking developments of the post-War period in the novel is pre-occupation with social and sociological themes. The total impression one is left with in *Chaknoiya* is the sad imbalance, the discrepancy between man's ideal and its realisation due to futility of attitude. Vivek is not defeated in his faith, he wants to keep alive the "spark of human dignity"; it is his conscience that is disturbed. Though devoid of Vivek's idealistic vein, other characters in the story like Amala are portrayed in the full glow of colour rather than in sepia. Within the framework of reality and relevance, the novelist is a

man who keeps through life the eye of a child dilating at the oddities, surprises and marvels of the human scene. In the sweep and range, poignancy and architectonics of Goswami's *Chaknoiya*, all this is reflected. His second novel is *Bamarali* (1958).

Naba Barua's *Kapiliparia sadhu*, a story of strife and struggle, disillusion and despair, may be described as poetry based on extremely refined assimilation of reality. Like Blackmore's *Lorna Doone* (1869), the narration is "forever running into the rhythms of verse", a characteristic that is basically antagonistic to stern effects. Rupai, the central figure of the story is a child of the river, his life-spring twined into its panorama. The story interest does not flag; it reaches a tragic climax when Rupai is deterred from performing the *sradh* ceremony of his father Dhirsingh, for, he was a mere foundling in the floods; this accounts for his psychology of intense attachment to the river. This may be defined, to use the words of Paul West, as the "view of man in the abstract". Such a story, slim as a poplar tree, might easily become overburdened with sentimentalism or politico-ethical amplitudes. In Barua's lyrical hands, it rings true as a whole.

The violent tempo of the last War created many social and psychological problems in our State. Jogesh Das's (b. 1927) *Dawar aru nai* is a graphic portrait of the psycho-social currents and complexes in the perspective of War, an "uneasy scrapping on the scalp", to use D. H. Lawrence's words. Like C. E. Montague's *Disenchantment* (1922) and *Rough Justice* (1926), it is a blatant exposure of the ugliness of War. Unlike Vivek of *Chaknoiya*, the hero of this novel Bakhar is not "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought"; in his mission of social understanding, Bakhar finds a friend in Jivan, a political worker, through whom the 1942 movement for freedom is splashed suggestively into the canvas. There are two sets of parallel characters in the novel. One: Garela, Gauri and in certain respects Anupama suffering from the decadence of the soul due to War-time social whirlpool; this, Das portrays with relentless reality. And another: Bakhar, Bhim, Nizam and Jivan who refuse to be affected by War-intoxication; this, Das portrays with fidelity and sympathy.

Broadly humanistic in appeal and intimate in delineation of War-time crisis of confidence, *Dawar aru nai* is noted for its author's sense of technical restraint and control over verbal medium as also his capacity to fit action into a setting and invest it with picturesque illusions. Jogesh Das has a way of dramatising his characters' feelings in terms of their own consciousness and let them alone to unfold their story. Das has drawn illuminating portraits of women whether in the nubile or uneasy married stage. His other novels are *Sahari pai*, *Jonakir Jui* (1956) and *Nirupai nirupai* (1963).

The average reader tended to dismiss James Joyce and Virginia Woolf as "self-conscious highbrows", but to try to dismiss Dr. P. D. Goswami as such would be difficult. His *Kechapatar kapani* is an interesting experiment in technique and character study. The central character Utpal is eccentric not in the way that some of Homen Bargohain's or Padma Barkataki's characters are eccentric, for, they have a "method" even in their eccentricity, but in a way that is vague and undefined. Utpal's eccentricity is temperamental; perhaps the author wanted to portray him as a symbol of the restiveness of the time and the romantic halo in young impressionable minds that the Communist underground movement generally produced. His women-characters like Nilima and Minati are typical of the lower middle class urbanised mind, basically distorted in attitude and outlook. To be brief, there is in the story an inconsequential search for a suitable equation in life between discordant forces, personal and socio-political; it shows how enervating the deadlock of minds could be. With Dr. Goswami, the main aesthetic problem lies in the fact of union and reconciliation of the many diverse elements in the eccentric.

In 1958 was published Kailash Sarma's *Vidrohi Nagar Hatat*; although the portrayal of situation and character is bold, and at times exasperatingly vivid, the author's approach is pragmatic and he suffers from a strange kind of dualism between prejudice and sympathy; it is a story about hostile Nagas, including their underground cells. Technically the novel is not without blemish. Sarma's another novel, romantic in theme, on Naga life is *Anami Nagini* (1963). Although the author has succeeded in giving

intimate pictures of Naga socio-ritualistic life and the story is lyrical all through, the plot is thin and inept. A novel of conscience, the only major work on Naga life is Biren Bhatta's *Iyaruvingam* (1960) which means "people's raj" in the Naga language.

The life of the simple Naga people, the impact of Christianity on a section of them and their traditional concepts, political consciousness and a new sense of values under altered conditions generated by Japanese thrust into the area as also the introduction of Mr. Phizo's ideas of an independent Naga State, all this is brought into a convincing focus in Biren Bhatta's *Iyaruvingam*. And against this background of conflict of minds runs like a silver thread the love story of Richang and Khutingla, daughter of Nazak. The situation is complex, but the author's quality of deft narration and inward sympathy for these people gives it the natural spontaneity of sunshine in a wintry day; the canvas of the novel is wide, although the perspective is limited.

Bhatta has to his credit two other novels *Rajpathe ringiai* (1957) and *Ai* (1960). The former is a political novel; the panorama of the '42 struggle for national freedom with all its agonising experiences of fulfilment reels off like a series of cinematographic "slides" in the mind of Mohan, the central character, on August 15, 1947. This re-appraisal is made in a phraseology which is so much chiselled that at times it takes away much of the intensity of the idiom. Although the end is depressingly melodramatic, *Ai* paints social vignettes of rural life with an intimate brush, the traditional socio-economic rural compromise being rudely challenged by distress and difficulty, urbanised passion and prejudice.

Though it is often said that poets and short story writers transgressing into novel writing do not generally make a success of the job, the same cannot be said of Abdul Malik. Deeply sensitive, Malik's passage from short story to novel is a rewarding experience. Despite the author's socially conscious mind, romantic undercurrents are vivid in his first novel *Ratharchakari ghure* (1958) as also in the subsequent one, *Bonjui* (1958). In *Chhabighar* (1959), this undercurrent becomes an overtone. Marked by a sort of structural depravation, this novel is of the type of a film

journal story and whatever appeal it has is merely snob-appeal. Notwithstanding this, nobody can question Malik's felicitous control of the medium of communication and his sensitive reaction to experience.

The river is not merely a symbol of romantic association; the river and the life of man, not in a mystical lyrical vein, are woven into a common destiny. *Kapiliparia sadhu* is a novel of "liquid beauty"; other novels written against the background of rivers, some pseudo-romantic and some realistic, are K. P. Barthakur's *Luitar parare dhunia suwalijani* and *Luitar epare sipara*, Kumar Kishore's *Kapili nirave kande*, Nirupama Bargohain's *Sei nadi niravadhi* etc.; but the most powerful impact of river on man is drawn by Abdul Malik in his *Surujmukhir swapna* (1960), a story of rural idealism.

Surujmukhir swapna paints the life of a Muslim village, fortified and often disturbed by the river Dhansiri; even in devastation, it builds up hopes and aspirations that generate in the people a relentless will to resist misfortune. The replacement of Tara by her thirty-year old widowed mother Kapahi in marriage with Gulas, a hardworking young peasant, is brought about in a *tour de force* manner. This appears to be inept, but the total effect of the story is so powerfully moving that it ultimately forces one into believing what is palpably unbelievable. Tara, deep in affection and agonised in mind, has the elegance of a sunflower; Kapahi, who has seen life and seen it whole, is a wily type, motivated not by any dreams but by designs only. Although slightly pornographic in fundamental vision, Malik's *Jiajurir ghat* (1960) is a story of intense human interest. His other novels are *Kanthahar* (1961), *Anya akash anya tara* (1962) and *Ruptirthar jatri* (1963). Though usually his reactions are not those of an idealist but of a romanticist with a glazed vision, Malik's sensitive approach to situation is something that is inherent and his response to problems that plague society is something that is instinctive. He depicts social problems with protests and no regrets, while Jogesh Das does so with regrets and no protests. Without suffering from any ideological bias, Malik's soul is deeply attuned to the soil whether of rural country-

side or of urban complexes; in the depiction of both, he wields an equally facile pen.

Although each has atleast a standard work to his credit, novelists from Dandi Kalita to Biren Bhatta have drawn so heavily on their emotional reserve that nothing they have produced subsequently has succeeded in achieving the norm they themselves have established. With Rasna Barua who is Bina Barua of *Jivanar Batat*, it is different. The socio-economic life of the labour people, their occasional sex lapses as also those of the European manager of the tea garden and his wife Mrs. Miller, a perpetually sex-starved woman, all these details are brought into a psycho-pathological focus in Rasna Barua's *Seujipatar Kahini* (1958). Besides Nareswar, a village lad who finds a job with the garden manager, Soniya, a girl of the labour community who is both intelligent and attractive, is psychologically a precise character. Her extraordinary intelligence, her temperamental idiosyncracies, all these are a subtle confirmation of her illegitimate birth, European father and tea garden labour mother. Besides Nareswar's moral revulsion at the sex overtures of Mrs. Miller is itself a sad commentary on the British colonial society of our country.

Very often than not, Barua is digressive in the manner of the 19th century English novel, a worn-out technical device that from the point of reality and relevance produces a dissipating effect. Redundant from the point of the story, the fully limned picture of Ojar gaon may be taken as an instance. Somehow or rather, the story, an absorbing one with illuminating flashes of character study and theme, gets bogged down in departures of this sort and over-elaboration of certain aspects of social life; the result is that one reaches the end with an exasperated feeling of relief. Precision is art, pointless over-elaboration is reverse of it. *Seujipatar Kahini* is at best a descriptive novel with a psychological undertone.

C. P. Saikia's *Mandakranta* (1960) is a story of romantic idealism leaning heavily on purple passages; the author's sympathy for the suffering Moseses like Dipak is unquestionable. The two women characters Urmi and Indira with their maudling fashionable ideals, didactic approach to life and exciting responses are just

the love-and-marry type of girls; even their youthful dreams are pale and shadowy. This must be said that Saikia seeks to present life with photographic accuracy, but not without detachment. *Mandakranta* has more colour than cohesion. His subsequent novel *Meghamallar* (1963) shows by contrast much developed technical qualities.

There are generally two accepted literary ways of writing about sex with artistic integrity: (i) openly pornographic that stimulates excitement in both the reader and the writer, and (ii) Miss McCarthy's way in which "excitement is out of the question for reader and author alike". With Jogesh Das and Rasna Barua, it is the second method. With Padma Barkataki and Homen Bargohain, it is the first. Whatever that may be, although concerned primarily with sexual aberrations, it would be wrong to describe Padma Barkataki's art as essentially pornographic. It is subtly satirical in a modern context.

Barkataki's pre-occupation is with urban life, the new class born of fashionable ideals, the strings of whom are artificially tied to the world of hybrid western culture, the rejuvenated relic of a colonial past. *Manar dapon* (1959) is a story of silent love between Abhoy, a press correspondent and Padumi, a village girl driven to desperation and death by circumstances. Into this simple framework are thrown Mr. Barua, a barrister-at-laws turned businessman, Janu, a butterfly of a college girl, Kangshi, a Khasi woman, Mrs. Bora and Mahesh. *Pari passu* with it is drawn an atmosphere of club-life, sham aristocracy, wine and women. The story may be described as half-fiction and half-autobiography enriched with odd types and incidents that can aptly be described as George Borrow's type of "literature of vagabondage". Whether in language or plot-construction, delineation of character or situation, Barkataki maintains a posture of excitement all through, often morbid, but nevertheless gripping in appeal. His other novels are *Khabar bichari* (1960) and *Kono khed nai* (1963). The last one is a historical novel woven round queen Phuleswari of Siva Singha (1714-1736). Historical materials about this romantic Ahom queen who showed great power and wisdom in

statecraft are limited; nevertheless Barkataki paints a convincing picture of the queen in all its tragic anti-climax with sympathy and concern. *Kono khed nai* is fictional biography embellished with subtle characterisation.

If C. P. Saikia is subjective and sentimental, Homen Bargohain is impersonal and objective with a vengeance. A powerfully told story of sex, in *Subala* (1963) Bargohain describes the grimness and misery, physical squalor and spiritual emptiness associated with the world of prostitution with enviable insight and intimacy. The principal character of the story Subala is rent asunder between two conflicting emotions, the horrors of dying, for, she does not want to commit suicide to escape the ordeal of economic privations, and the horror of living in the vortex of debasing conditions she has been beguiled into by men of monstrous perversity like Naren and others. Although generally Bargohain's philosophy is negative, *Subala*, without any pseudo-sense of morality or ethical reserve reaches to the most obscure and hidden levels of consciousness and human sympathy. Subala's protracted disintegration is chartered with acid compassion; the author seems to speak through his characters, adopting for semi-ironic *oratio obliqua* the clichés they would themselves use; naturally the dialogue is brisk without obvious straining after effect. To conclude: Homen Bargohain is affirmative in two different ways; aesthetically, in his capacity to produce "harmony and radiance"; psychologically, in his capacity to produce the effect of understanding by resolution of tension inherent in characters.

L. N. Bora's *Gangachilanir pakhi* (1963) is a story of rural life, of quaint peasantry and their problems complicated by steady erosion of traditional values due to the intrusion of urban attitudes of life into the panorama of rural compromise. Apart from the fact that certain incidents in their minor details are over-dramatised, the central character Basanti is psychologically an adroit portrait; although the end of the story is one of anticlimax, the narration is restrained and picturesque, suave and expressive all through. Sexual attachment portrayed in the story is refined and suggested almost with a "clinical detachment". L. N. Bora's art is suffused

with the "tone of time", the colours of which are subdued and outlines softened by the "pathos of distance". Like Jogesh Das, Abdul Malik and R. M. Goswami, Bora is stirred by the tragic pathos of humanity caught between its urge for happiness and the cruel limitations imposed by circumstances, social and material, as also those rooted in the contradictions of human nature itself. Like Johann Bojer's, the stirrings with L. N. Bora are spiritual, not in the sense of religious piety, but that of heart-interest. His other novel is *Sei sure utala* (1960).

Lumber Dai, an Adi young man of NEFA, has written two enervating novels in Assamese: *Paharar sile sile* (1960) and *Prithivir hahi* (1963). Other noteworthy novels of recent years are Sada Moral's *Sonapur*, P. Bharadwaj's *Uranta meggar chha*, N. Bezbarua's *Natun diganta*, B. Barua's *Manjetukar pat*, Kiranmayee Devi's *Jivan sangram*, Suresh Goswami's *Sat rangar natun kareng* and *Maharanar binani*, Tilak Das's *Silpi*, Mathura Deka's *Devagiri*, Jamiruddin's *Abhijatri* and *Chandan*, K. Sabhapandit's *Jivanar dabi*, Nalini Chakravartty's *Alap maram*, *alap trisna* and *Surjya hano lukai ache ae aranyat*, D. Bhattacharjya's *Adhunika*, Miss S. Rai-Chaudhury's *Bamarali*, Kanchan Barua's *Asimat jar haral sima*, Saumar's *Kamini kanchan*, G. S. Das's *Andharar atithi*, K. Chaliha's *Sundarar aghat*, Jatin Goswami's *Matir bukul*, Kumar Kishore's *Sikhar kapani*, *Chhayapath* and *Kabor aru kankal*, Adya Sarma's *Jivanar tini adhaye*, S. Pathak's *Bidayar akarshan* and Uma Barua's *Lular pare pare* and *Sien noir dhau* etc.

Conclusion:

In tone and temper, character and story, Christian novels initiated by the American Baptist Mission are made of the stuff of contemporary life, man's travail and sentiments; it is in objectives and expression that they are circumscribed. Broadly speaking, our novel until recent years, during which period it has tended to become fairly psychological, had alternated between two phases, social and historical. Novel in the initial stage, as already pointed out, was socio-religious under the inspiration of Baptist Missionaries like A. K. Gurney. Padma Gohain-Barua and Rajani

Bardoloi widened the frontiers of the novel by introducing subject-matter from history. This must however be remembered that mere transcription of history into creative prose is not literature, as doggerel is not poetry. They did something more than transcribe history, yet then, they were circumscribed within the limits of their own idiosyncrasies. Gohain-Barua was feudalistic in tone and Bardoloi a traditionalist by temperament. Although character-study was not altogether neglected, they laid emphasis more on the narration of events than on the conscious development of technique.

It is true that the aim of these novelists was to create memorable characters and to adorn their stories with moral idioms and ethical susceptibility, to achieve which they developed the peculiar habit, particularly Bardoloi, of interrupting the placid flow of their stories with moral didacticism, an enemy of true aesthetics. Their characters, if not outright shady, are usually identified with certain stereotyped aspects in which either the good predominates over the bad or the *vice versa*. At the end of the story, the reader is presented with a *fait accompli* of two sets of characters, one good and the other bad, and the story is also manouevred to fit into this pre-conceived pattern in a *tour de force* manner.

To be precise, the Assamese novel in the modern sense of the term is only a decade and half old. The continued development of the science of psychology has come to enrich and deepen the inner susceptibilities of characters; its full impact on our literature is only a recent experience. Exploration of the regions of the subconscious as also of the unconscious, new areas of discovery, has made the novelist turn his gaze more and more into the dark areas of the mind that palpably exist between thought and feeling. To the influence of Freudian and Jungian psychology and the slow dissolution of traditional moral compulsions under the impact of rationalised attitude must be ascribed the present-day pre-occupation with sex, as in Homen Bargohain's *Subala*. Likewise, apart from what the psychoanalysts have contributed, to Dostoevsky may be ascribed the present-day pre-occupation with morbid mental states, as in R. M. Goswami's

Chaknoiya. Thus the frontiers of our novel are extended in the direction of (i) new conception of character nurtured in the springs of inner consciousness, and (ii) aesthetic consolidation of pattern and composition

The salient features of contemporary Assamese fiction may be summed up as follows: (i) Its pre-occupation with social problems. Romantic absorption in lyrical rural vignettes is nothing but a twilight glimmer of a closing day; it is the socio-economic as also socio-psychological problems of rural and urban life that are mostly reflected in these novels. In this limited framework are depicted misfits in marriage, problems of frustrated love, domestic clashes, sexual transgressions, inter-family feuds etc. This must be said that our fiction writers write naturally about rural life, avoiding stilted phraseology and abstruse symbolism. (ii) It is true that the romantic novel which outlines the hero as a vapid individual who thinks and thinks and even wilfully indulges in the luxury of futility continued to inspire our fiction writers in some cases; but, by and large it is only a passing phase. *Pari passu* with it, contemporary literary intentions have come in to inspire our present-day fiction with a significant rhythm and meaning. (iii) Our present-day fiction shows a bias towards realism and sex. Whether this realism is the offspring of French naturalism, Baudelaire, Flaubert or Maupassant, it is difficult to say, but judging from the acuteness, the "Bovarinic angle" from which sex is portrayed, the impact of Moravia seems to be pronounced. (iv) The historical novel, generally speaking, is out of vogue in the modern context, for, like any other thing, the sources of history cannot be perennial. Besides, because of the incessant researches conducted into the dark cells of history, it no longer commands that distant view lending "enchantment" to the perspective. (v) To conclude: In present-day fiction, the characters are much more naturally and plausibly developed and the technical devices for giving verisimilitudes and maintaining story interest are also developed with a similar gusto.

short story

YOUNG IN tradition,—even in England it was in the period that culminated in the first World War that short story first emerged as a form to be reckoned with separately,—short story is of the stuff of life, while tales of romance with their eerie atmosphere are unconnected with life's natural landscape. It is strange to know how some of the folk-tales find a common tradition from the Pamirs to the Brahmaputra valley. These tales are the creative efforts of a primitive folkmind at envisioning an atmosphere in which the cold facts of life do not find a place. Despite this fact, that folk-tales as such had a contribution to make to the growth and development of the modern story, there is no doubt.

The history of modern Assamese short story can be divided into three distinct periods: (i) the pre-*Awahon* era, i.e., before 1929, (ii) the *Awahon* era that lasted upto the last War, and (iii) the post-War era. Our modern short story that saw its birth under the auspices of *Jonaki* is an offshoot of western literary impact. True it is that certain traces of folk-tradition lingered on atleast in the work of pioneers like L. N. Bezbarua, yet then, the perspective of what a modern story is was becoming steadily clear. Bezbarua's initial attempt was to re-create our folk-tales which he did in his own inimitable homely style. His collections of folk-tales are *Buri air sadhu* and *Kakadeuta aru natilora* (1912). It was in 1912 that his

first collection of short stories *Suravi* was published. Though traditional in outlook, Bezbarua's stories are the first serious attempt at depicting life naturally with its ethos and *elan*, joys and despair. What he depicted in his stories was mainly rural life and vignettes; the emerging new class under British rule also engaged his serious attention.

Without being cynical, Bezbarua was satirical in some of his stories, a tradition that has been followed by some writers like Mahi Bora and L. N. Phukan of the subsequent generation. Satire is born of a sense generally of intellectual superiority, but with Bezbarua, who could laugh away the cruel follies of life, it was different. What perplexed him was the sense of folly exhibited by the so-called new class that basked under alien sunshine and considered it real; his sense of patriotism was affected by these blind social drifts which he lampooned with a deftness akin to Swift. His stories like *Bhempuria maujadar*, *Dhowakhowa*, *Dharmadhvaj Phoisanavis*, *Mangaluchandra*, *Molak guin guin* etc. are instances in point. To say in the words of Edith Sitwell, reading them is like "eating into sour apples".

Except *Bhadari* and a few others, Bezbarua's stories are mostly loose verbal structures, very often than not the non-serious cutting into the fundamentals of comprehensive realisation and plot-structure; thus, because of faulty technique, stories like *Putraban pita*, *Kasibashi*, *Moidam* etc. lose much of the inherent emotional edge, not to speak of creating an atmosphere of emotional suspense. Again, because of the too much projection, of the writer's incongruous mental reaction, some of the stories lack in natural development, and end abruptly. On the other hand, because of the note of seriousness which distinguishes some of the stories from the writer's general approach, the agony as in *Ratan Munda* is all-pervasive; in *Bhadari*, it is spiritually ennobling.

By marriage, Bezbarua was connected with the Bengali society; stories like *Pandit mosai*, *Laokhola*, *Putraban pita*, *Doctor babur sadhu*, *Bhuruki ban* etc. are written in this social context. By profession, he was a timber merchant at Shambalpur, a fact that encouraged day-to-day contact with the local people like Kols and Mundas.

All these experiences helped him to widen the perspective of literary understanding and thematic compass. There is a cross-section of emotions in Bezbarua's stories; some tragi-comic in appeal and some like *Jene chor tene tangun*, *Jagara mandalar premabhinay* etc. are openly of the burlesque type. Humour, Bergson says, is the result of incongruities; Bezbarua is an adept in creating humour through the portrayal of incongruous situation and character.

Bezbarua depicts Assamese social life generally in two broad phases: (i) the lower middle class shambling for false values, and (ii) the simple peasants circumscribed by their own pangs and pleasures. Though they do not show craftsmanship at its best, some of his stories are invariably social snapshots of a high order. *Seuti* depicts inhuman treatment meted out to an innocent woman by an irrational society. *Nakau*, *Jolkonwari*, *Kanya* and *Bhadari* are stories in which the emphasis on character and situation is pronounced. From the point of human interest and character study, *Bapiram* is a story that deserves high merit; it depicts life in a tea garden, the moral aberrations of a *barmahari* (clerk) who conspired to offer his young widowed sister Tilaka to the European manager for a lift in his job. In contrast to it, the character of Bhabiram, a domestic servant, whose devotion to the family is unflinching, shines like pure gold. Another story of human interest is *Mr. Phillipson* that depicts tea garden life *vis-à-vis* the moral aberrations of an Anglo-Indian manager; even this story of purple heart interest is marred by Bezbarua's flippancy of style. In some of the stories like *Erabari*, *Swargarohan*, *Lov* etc. the dream technique is profitably used. On the other hand, the natural beauty of stories like *Doctor babur sadhu*, *Malati*, *Maidam* etc. is marred by the introduction of supernatural elements. Besides manoeuvred accidents and coincidences are not fit artifices for modern short story, for, if naturalness is the prerequisite of any art, then it is invariably of the short story.

Whatever the blemishes, Bezbarua's descriptions are generally graphic and vivid, and style picturesque. His characters are fixed types. Temperamentally Bezbarua was as cheerful as a lark and this possibly accounts for his inherent bias for exaggeration.

tion. Though accepted commonly as the father of our modern short story, Bezbarua gave so much of free reins to facetiousness that he cannot justly be credited with artistic restraint or with integrity of imagination and inner congruity of theme. His collections of stories are *Sadhukathar kuki* (1910), *Suravi* (1912) and *Jonbiri* (1913).

The last volume of Bezbarua's stories was published in 1913 and it was a year later that the first volume of Sarat Goswami's stories *Galpanjali* was published; his other volumes are *Moina* (1920), *Bajikar* (1930) and *Paridarshan* (1956). With none of the incoherence of his predecessor, Goswami's stories show a certain departure in technique; his emphasis was on character study and plot-structure. Goswami gave to his theme a broad-based understanding of human strength and frailties; at a time when social thinking was unduly harsh on women, widowhood was a major problem and even girl widows had to face an oppressive ordeal. Goswami has treated this problem with understanding as he has treated cases of misfits in marriage and married women's transgression in love (*Brahmaputrar bukul*) with sympathy. *Yatri* is the story of a man, Gadadhar by name, who is stirred to the depth by the charms of Santi, but forsakes her for fear of social wrath and goes into oblivion. Goswami x-rays social problems with passion and precision, but was too timid to suggest any radical solution.

The story *Rakta bij* depicts how our villages are torn by internal strife, *Sannyasini* sexual attachment of an illegal type and *Banaria prem* unsophisticated love between a Mîri boy and girl. Judging from the latter two, Goswami's stories are stories of simple romantic understanding where the heart pines either for extra-marital love or for love of the nubile stage. From the point of human psychology, the story *Nadoram*, the hero of which is a Kachari youth, is extremely intricate. Goswami was temperamentally liberal and comprehensive, and as a writer possessed a kinetic view; at times, it is true that the lenses proved defective and the pictures tended to become lopsided. But that Goswami was not a moral *poseur*, there is no doubt. Like those of Bezbarua's, his stories like *Brah-*

maputrar bukut, *Devadarshan* etc. suffer from certain technical blemishes brought about by the introduction of supernatural elements and improbable incidents. To be brief, Bezbarua and Goswami belonged to the old school of our short story writers and it is no wonder that their compositions did not involve the requisite technique of the modern story. But that they laid the foundation of the modern story in our language is a historical fact.

Other short story writers of the pre-*Awahon* era are Nakul Bhuyan, Dr. S. K. Bhuyan, Mitraddev Mahanta and Dandi Kalita. Nakul Bhuyan's collections are *Chorang chowar chora* (1918), *Jonowali* (1933) and *Galpar sarai* (1962). Other collections are *Panchami* by Dr. S. K. Bhuyan, *Chandrasahar* (1924) by Mitraddev Mahanta and *Satsari* (1925) by Dandi Kalita. Dr. Bhuyan is known for his balanced style and sober appraisal of human emotions; except in the hands of this writer, the technique of the story did not make much progress in those of the rest beyond what Bezbarua and Goswami fixed as standards.

While the first volume of his stories *Mala* (1918) shows L. N. Phukan fumbling for technique, *Ophaidang* (1952) and *Maramar Mudhuri* (1963) show his art and power of comprehension and expression at its scintillating best. Deeply stirring, Phukan's *Typistar jivan* is a portrait of agony of a life ruined by economic want and in contrast to it the sham sympathy of the rich who loosen their purse-strings only on the dead ashes of a man, and that too on an item that proclaims their moneyed authority rather than real sympathy; the supreme irony of the situation is skilfully brought out towards the end. Though the *modus operandi* is different, *Typistar jivan* like R. M. Goswami's *State Transport* expresses a social idea; the oil painting, in memory of the dead typist on the office wall is a sad commentary on the vulgar rich. With one stroke of the pen, the author brings out the emotional norm of the story that is "too deep for tears".

Phukan's *Mahimmayyi*, picture of a grandiose woman whose husband is the head clerk of a tea estate, excites both pity and laughter. The writer is an adept at painting this type of character, egoistic and superficial; thus he creates an incongruous situation

which is brought out into focus by contradictory trends. To sum up : In Phukan's stories there is a conflict of impulse and whatever irony is evident in the characters is due to this. Emotionally precise, his stories like *Typistar jivan*, *Adinar chinaki*, *Bihu sanmilan*, *Mahimamayi*, *Private Secretary* etc. represent characters that are social rather than individual types. Phukan belongs to the past as to the present : *Mala* entitles him to a place with the pioneers of our story like Bezbarua and Goswami; *Ophaidang* and *Maramar madhuri* connect him with the traditions of the *Awahon* age.

(ii) *Awahon Age* :

As in the rest of the world, our short story too is mainly fostered and promoted by magazines and journals; except a few of these stories with a so-called "snob appeal", the rest are destined to stay and have stayed. During this period, the scope of the story witnessed a significant expansion,—western influence, more of a universal nature, made itself felt and produced an impact. The stories of this period were stimulated by the examples of foreign masters of the *conte* like Maupassant and Chekov, and besides them by many notable English writers of the story. These masters made their contributions in technique and form. Freud, Jung and Adler made theirs in the portrayal of sex and psychology. Though an initial beginning was made in these directions during the *Awahon* age, it is the post-War period that shows in fact more distinct and conscious absorption.

Generally speaking, if the stories of the pre-*Awahon* period are objective and descriptive, those of the *Awahon* era tended to become more subjective in the accepted sense. Except a few social studies by writers like H. R. Deka, Trailokya Goswami and Mahi Bora, the rest invariably tended to be romantic. To be precise, the *Awahon* age not only widened the thematic and technical scope of the story, but also reflected to an extent the placid temper of the age, an age primarily of compromise and equipoise. Life in the thirties, despite growing middle class unemployment of the educated, was accepted with a placid calm. This accounts for the wide popularity of the romantic theme during this period.

Pari passu with it, even romantic stories tended to become realistic and the writer's repressed energy was directed towards that release. Except in writers like Nagendra Chaudhury, the theme became less conventional and psychologically more realistic. That the modern story is a one-piece thing and that it cannot be omnibus like a railway compartment, Nagen Chaudhury did not seem to know. That he lacked in the sense of structure is evident from stories like *Bogitora*, *Parivartan* etc., and that at times he was melodramatic is evident from stories like *Vijaya*, *Tamar tabij*, etc. Chaudhury seems to be at the crossroads of two impulses, his temperamental affiliation with the conventional and the natural urge to identify himself with the new concept; in this conflict, it is the former that proved overpowering.

Without any prejudice or irony of a vitriolic type, Mahi Bora's pictures are pictures of lower middle class society, its banality and buffoonery, poise and poetry. By this he produces a double effect, an effect on intellect as also on emotion that easily touches the fringes of man's consciousness. His characters are typical of certain human aspects capable of exciting either pity or abhorrence, but not vulgar prejudice or passion. Even his chastisement is coloured with certain warmth of feeling: because of it, his absurdities do not appear as absurdities. Bora's *Abhoy* and *Keranir kapal* are apt studies of human nature. Despite the fact that because of the exaggerated emphasis laid on certain aspects the story in *Abhoy* suffers, the pleasurable situation created in it by certain psychodynamic method and uncanny way of presenting oddities makes it appealing. At the same time, stories like *Ukilar apad* are frankly farcical. *Jog aru biyog*, *Asara khalu samsara*, *Jai parajai*, *Labh lokchan*, *Ukilar janma rahashya* etc. are some of Bora's well-known stories that are noted alike for gusto and grim humour, verve and vitality. Bora's approach is invariably oblique.

Satirical with certain ironic overtones, in H. R. Deka's stories neither the plot leads the characters nor it is *vice versa*; it is a well-knit pattern in which the balance in architectonics is effected through a neat prose style. Despite the fact that they vibrate with undertones of irony and cynicism, his stories like *Photographer*,

Parvatar tingar bangala ghar, *Sahaj samadhan*, *Parajai* etc. are graphic in picture. A certain sense of morbidity is often evident in some of Dekha's stories which however does not affect the basic emotional fibre of his theme. Told in a simple style, perhaps his best is *Re re bare bhai*, a story of rare human integrity seen from a highly emotional plane; it depicts heart interest "raw as human blood". Perhaps due to certain mental preoccupations which became almost an inhibition with him, Dekha suffered occasionally, as evident from his *Mora ghora*, from certain technical blemishes; nevertheless, that he is a finished story writer, there is no doubt.

Although some of his stories are romantic in essence, primarily Trailokya Goswami is a socially conscious writer. His socially conscious stories reveal two tendencies: (i) An ethical view of life in which is reflected his sympathy of a fundamental sort for the socially relegated like fallen men and women, widows etc. (ii) A radical approach which is evident mostly in his post-War stories,—degradation in man's morals brought about by the War and the effects of war, economic individualism etc. The first trend finds expression in his stories like *Daridrar binani*, *Jaroj*, *Bidhava* etc., and the second in stories like *Dutakia note*, *Controllar cheni* etc. The latter two are devastating appraisal of economic imbalance and distress resulting from post-War social conditions.

Trailokya Goswami is sober in his attitude and approach; whatever anger he displays at the sight of gross perjury is the anger of an honest man. Although romantic in theme, his stories like *Kapahi*, *Marichika* etc. are distinguished by balance and equipoise. He delineates urges for challenge against blind social sanctions in stories like *Patit aru patita*, but never encourages implementation of urges in practice. Whatever evidence of social disdain *Ata garam coat* gives is marked by a certain spirit of tolerance. A social critic of exceptional vim and vigour, Goswami's faith in the ultimate regeneration of society into rational values is not dim. Clear and precise in idiom, his stories generally do not lose their moorings in digressive diffusion. What however one misses in Goswami's stories is sharpness of edges; it is natural in the case of a man with

whom the idea of artistic relevance and that of restraint are correlated. Goswami's collections are *Aruna*, *Marichika* and *Silpirianma*.

Although only five of them are so far published in a collection called *Vyarthatar dan* (1938) and the rest still lie scattered in the pages of journals, Lakshmi Sarma's stories mark a radical departure in technique and revolutionary idealism from the trend till then in vogue. Sarma was a product of the Gandhian renaissance, but the fountain-head of his inspiration was western social thought and philosophy, particularly of Hobbes and Locke; unlike Hobbes, his was not a cynical view of human nature nor did he suffer from any moral nihilism to relieve him of the pangs of conscience. Sarma meant to give us the essential truth, however revolting it might be from the social point of view. From Maupassant he drew his technical inspiration which was equally graphic and blatant in expression; but this must be noted that on no occasion the poetry of his language was allowed to lapse into vulgarity.

Sarma was a socio-intellectual force who employed his power of narration and the capacity to focus ideas into a purposive context that naturally imparted vibrant reality to his stories. Impelled by an inherent revolutionary idealism when he attacks the sham social order disrupting the basic ethos of life, he does so with the vehemence of an iconoclast. His *Vidrohini*, story of a young widow reduced into an object of pity by social obduracy, is a rebellious challenge, a splinter thrown on the painted veil of society. In this story the influence of Ibsen's idea of the sovereignty of womanly impulse expressed in a rational context is pronounced. Sarma has made a daring experiment of this idea and from the point of the architectonics of style, the story is without blemish. Social suppression is an evil, its psychological effect is disastrous,—that is lesson one learns from *Vidrohini*. In a sense, *Siraj* is a poem of pity where is shown the cancer of social idiosyncrasy reducing the poetry of life into vulgarity. In this story he digresses a little; this digression helps to bring into an emotional focus the intensity of the theme rather than smother it into an imprecise idiom. Whatever the impact of western thought, Sarma's basic inspiration

must have been from the tone and temper of the time, initiated by Tagore and Gandhiji.

Bina Barua has to his credit two volumes of stories, *Pat-parivartan* (1948) and *Aghonibai* (1950) that show two distinct stages of development of his art and insight. Barua's *forte* is depiction of rural life which he does with an animated instinct in *Aghonibai*; the leading figure of the title story of this volume is an inspiring character, the poignant misfortune of whose life is brought out in scintillating prose. Jatin Goswami's *Kanchanmati* delineated through a complicated plot with insight can be described as a recent counterpart of Barua's *Aghonibai*; the depiction of life in both the cases is sensitive and realistic. Bina Barua's rural idiom is potentially as rich as Saurov Chaliha's urban idiom; the descriptions that show the author's acute power of observation have a pictorial quality about them.

In contrast to *Aghonibai*, the stories of Barua's *Pat parivartan*, except *Lapeli*, are adolescent flirtations with romantic themes that produce in the ultimate analysis only a chocolate-cream effect. *Lapeli* in which the simple and unsophisticated nature of a Naga girl is brought out in the best tradition of L. N. Bezbarua's *Dalimi* breathes of a naturalness which gives the story a balanced romantic idiom. Barua has a developed sense of technique and his capacity for character study, under whatever circumstances, is invariably real and spontaneous.

Roma Das's stories (collection: *Srestha galpa*) are stories not so much of moods but of impulses, and whatever complexity the characters unfold is of the sentimental and romantic type. Even the idiosyncrasies of his characters, sexual or otherwise, have a glazed brilliance in them that invariably compels attention. Das's capacity to capture the different facets of life, particularly of the middle class society, and weave a convincing panorama of fashion is unquestionable. His stories like *Rhododendronar bilas* are marked by a subtle irony, but, broadly speaking, most of his stories can best be described as romantic rhapsodies woven round characters that are only sentimentally true. In the matter of longing and loneliness saturated with the poetry of rains, *Barsa jetia namye* that

depicts the romantic ego spinning dreams is aesthetically inspiring.

Das possesses the power of enlivening situation with a passion; in his limpid style the author provides a perspective in *Jahnavi* that is lyrical in an epic sense. This must be said in this connection that Das's experience is limited to a particular stereotyped society, the sum-total of which is depressing. The society that he depicts is prudish, a rhododendron society to be precise, lost in its own catacombs of make-beliefs. *Jivanar arati* is a story of abnormal morbidity, perverse apparently, but suppressed sex, surely. In the representation of sex, Das's attitude is bold; in this as also in aesthetics and suave exposition of feelings two of his contemporaries who approximate him are Munin Barkataki and Krishna Bhuyan. The thirties are an era of absolute individualism and this might be one of the reasons that can be advanced in justification of romantic and sexual flippancy. Enamelled with a rich "plush of speech", what is masqueraded in Roma Das's stories under so-called "nice feelings" and "fine shades" is gross folly of a particular social set-up. He seems to have imbibed the style and technique of Lakshmi Sarma, what he misses however is the latter's spark of radical thinking. Das's latest collection of stories is *Barsajetia namye* (1964). *Mora suti* included in this volume is an illuminating departure in technique.

In his stories Uma Sarma (collection: *Ghurania prithivir beka path*) has made a deft use of psycho-pathology. His *Manuh janmar pisat*, noted for its undertone of agony, portrays successfully the mental conflict of a girl in a language of sober approach. *Pakhi* is a story of natural love. Though he appears to be strongly influenced by Bina Barua's *Pat-parivartan* type of stories in the initial stage, it was not before long that Sarma emerged out of it and found his own feet; the result is an improved technique and form and psychoanalytical character study. Dina Sarma's (collections: *Kalpana aru bastav*, *Dulal*, *Kuwa bhaturia othar talat*, *Pohar*) are romantic stories mostly that have both conflict and an element of drama.

Noted for subtle psychological approach and insight, two other

outstanding short story writers of this generation are Munin Barkataki and Krishna Bhuyan (*Niruddesh*, *Rupar puja* etc.). In their hands there had been a significant development of technique. Nalini Barua who died by his own hand while young has to his credit stories like *Amarjahaj* that show technical finish at its best; in point of human interest and psychological insight, *Amarjahaj* is one of our best short stories. Jamiruddin, Indibar Gogoi and Suprava Goswami are some other noted short story writers of this generation. Though their post-War contributions are by no way insignificant, by age and temperament, Premnarayan Datta and R. M. Goswami belong to this age; the latter has made significant contributions even during the *Awahon* age. P. N. Datta is noted for his sarcasm; in stories like *Asirbad*, *Bahbaramve*, *Gangatop* etc. his sarcasm is directed against the vulgar rich and the so-called educated jackdaws. He describes sex, but has never vulgarised it. Datta's collections are *Asirbad*, *He Hari sarva sunya*, *Adirasar utpatti* etc.

R. M. Goswami's *Niyati* and *State Transport* are illuminating pictures of lower middle class life. Precise in idiom, in the point of technique and character analysis *plus* appraisal of situation, *State Transport* is of absorbing interest. Noted for parallel studies of character and unobtrusive projection of attitudes, the story is redeemed by the picture of the central character, Datta, a man who strikes one with his quiet characteristics. He is an object of sympathy but not of pity. Underneath the writer's social psychology lies his cynical approach to the artificially polished norms of society on the one hand and sympathy for all those who are unwittingly victims of economic imbalance on the other. Structurally the story is a balanced development, a thing that one misses in Goswami's other stories like *Niyati*, *Devatar samadhi* etc.

To sum up: during the *Awahon* age, the lower middle class theme, particularly of a romantic vein, largely replaced the rural theme or social caricature popularised by L. N. Bezbarua; the architectonics of style had also shown a more concentrated development. While Bezbarua and Sarat Goswami intruded their personality into the canvas of stories, the *Awahon* writers avoided all such

cliches and artifices and tried to tell a story as it should be told without projecting themselves or their personal responses and reactions to the situation; into technical development of this kind, Maupassant's contribution is great. To be brief, in technique and form and natural and spontaneous expression of the real stuff of life, there was a remarkable advance made during this period. In one sense it broke the fetters of the past and in the other opened the floodgates of the future.

(iii) Post-War Era:

The post-War story is further enriched and embellished in technique and scope. To Freud is added Marx and to Maupassant, Chekov; besides, inspiration is drawn in style and technique from story writers like Somerset Maugham, Katherine Mansfield and others. Jung and Adler have come in to give a further fillip to psychoanalytical studies which was initially Freudian. True it is that this "wind of change" is blown in from outside, but the temper of the time is also in a receptive mood, primarily because of the forces let loose by (i) War conditions, (ii) 1942 movement for freedom, and finally by (iii) freedom itself. The War struck at the root of Assam's life; the conditions were hysteric that disturbed and distracted the even tempo of life; the after-effects of the War were even more disastrous from the socio-economic point of view. Yet then, the response to creative literature might have occasionally suffered a low tide, but was never stilled. The 1942 movement for freedom enflamed the vision of a new India, a socialist sovereign republic where exploitation is ended and justice and fairplay are assured. It is in this connection that Marx with his egalitarian economic thesis came in and it is through such visions that the dissipation brought about by alien rule was more or less forgotten.

True it is that freedom has opened the floodgates of opportunities, but, apart from the socio-economic evils generated by the War and its after-effects, new problems of economic and social imbalance, regional and communal strife have cropped up leading to further complications of the situation. All this, more or less, constitutes the stuff of contemporary Assamese fiction; in the treat-

ment one finds both the psychological and socio-economic aspects; Abdul Malik, a link between the two generations, reflects in a nutshell the passions and characteristics of both the *Awahan* and the post-War period. Malik's stories are examples of skilful and conscious craftsmanship in which every word tells and every effect is brought into a natural focus. He studies a great variety of characters and then brings them together into neatly discriminated compositions; one of course feels that in plot and character delineation he might have introduced more of Chekov into the technical framework that he initially derived from Maupassant. Malik's collections are *Parasmani*, *Ajani natun suwali*, *Rangagara* and *Moraha papari*.

Broadly speaking, Abdul Malik's stories can be classified into two categories: (i) romantic stories that connect him with the best traditions of Bina Barua and Roma Das, and (ii) socially conscious stories that fit him into post-War themes and times. Except vague flirtations, Marxist ideology is not a rigid doctrine with Malik; whatever sympathy and compassion he has for the socially dispossessed is instinctive rather than hued with any stereotyped politico-economic dogma. In a very valid sense, Malik is an arch-romanticist and even his socially conscious stories like *Siu maril*, *Aghantar diary*, *Rangagara* etc. are tinged with a basic romantic attitude; from this it would be wrong to suppose that his art was divorced from realism. What essentially was the case is that Malik's realism is invariably veneered with romantic prisms. In *Siu maril*, the conflict with social environment is brought out in an idealistic vein; in *Kathphula* one comes across one of Malik's best women characters, Mamataj, who is agonisingly sweet. His *Jesu Christar chhabi* and *Maram* are stories of great human appeal; in sensitivity of spirit, they are a captivating experience.

Malik's stories are technically rich; he has the double distinction of being (i) an avid story-teller, and (ii) an inspiring creator of character. His plots are primarily keyed to the suspense *motif* and whether a progress towards the "illusion of reality" is made or not, the story interest seldom flags. *Pran haruar pisat* is a successful

technical experiment. *Barakharar barasun* depicting economic distress that conflicts with self-respect in the life of Milad is humanistic in appeal. Socio-economic disharmony as also communal discord distresses Malik and whenever he writes of such freaks of life, he does so with unequalled fervour. *Bibhatsa bedana*, because of its overdose of sex, created a stir when it was first published, but one must not forget that underneath it a socially conscious idea is made to live with the compulsive force of a sermon. Although only apparent, Malik is the first to try to introduce the "Chekovian atmosphere" type stories in our language.

Whether romantic or realistic, Jogesh Das is convinced that essential truth is what he has to offer and in doing so he is determined to delineate truth in the living perspective of reality; he enriches the pattern of his stories not so much with crosslights of paradox and irony, but with those of inherent sympathy and understanding. Das deliberately avoids clichés and has no predilections; he tells a story in the convincing tone of word-of-mouth tradition rather than in the baroque extravagance of language and description; this helps the writer to dramatise the penchant for psychological study as evident from his stories like *Kalpatuar mrittu*; it has that startling human touch, quiet and yet subtle, which one usually misses in the eerie production of traditionalists. Das's collections are *Popia tora*, *Andharar are are* and *Modarar bedana* (1963).

In a simple unadorned style that does not appear alien to the context, Jogesh Das conveys his broad sympathies and human interests. His *Kalpatuar mrittu* is a psychological study of a lower middle class family against the background of which the character of Dhaniram, a domestic servant, emerges in a rare ethical aura; with one stroke of the brush, he brings out the nobility of this man against the sexual vandalism of the rich son of the family who despoils Rupe, a pretty maid, working with the family. There is an undertone of pathos in it as rich as that depicted in *Garakhania*; the atmosphere is surcharged with quiet emotional reaction and subdued response. The character of Tularam in *Chhinhamul* is a vibrant psychological study; the suspense in the atmosphere that

resolves itself towards the end through an agonising discovery is sustained all through with a quiet elegance of style. Although, according to some critics, he sounds "flat" and whatever liveliness he has is "dead-pan liveliness" resulting in the lack of "double sight" that is responsible for "mysterious vibrations of the unconscious", Jogesh Das, who has a balanced control over form and expression, produces a vivid effect.

Although his stories are relatively few, in Biren Bhatta events do not usually take precedence over character or situation except in his rather longish story *Kalang ajiu boi*. Perhaps the most engaging thing about Bhatta's stories, however diabolical the situation might be, is the essential innocence of his people. In fact, it is not evil, but a perverse system or natural predicament that makes them complex and abnormal in disposition. Intensely moving, *Ajani Japani suwali*, written against the background of the last atomic War is universal in appeal. Like Jogesh Das's stories, it is a vivid picture with the minimum of details showing the author's emotional and intellectual reaction to atomic destruction. Bhatta has the capacity to delineate even a piquant situation without much flourish.

One however misses the technical restraint of *Ajani Japani suwali* in his *Kalang ajiu boi* which is profuse like the river that swells and withdraws, protrudes and devastates. Although set in a lyrical perspective, it is a socio-political story, told realistically. The repeated misfortunes caused by the river, diseases and other natural calamities sharpen the edge of "open revolt" in Thagiram and other villagers; they pay the price in the hands of alien rulers, some by death brought about by bullets and some by imprisonment. Freedom comes, but economic distress continues to sap life as before. Thagiram is a disillusioned man; the river flows on and so does life. The crosslights of emotional reaction in the story are brought into a focus of chiselled intensity. Thagiram and Sonpahi are finely chiselled characters imbued with a soulful purpose.

In a different sense, Homen Bargohain like Saurov Chaliha has made bold thematic experiment by liberalisation of approach

and introduction of ideas in the way of Lakshmi Sarma of the *Awahon* age. If he writes of sex, sex is sexy; if he writes of flesh, flesh is fleshy rather than draped in unnecessary frills. This has prompted in him an instinct for the abnormally bizarre. What remains to the soul after all concessions are made to the confusions of the mind is that which is known as essential truth, and it is this aspect of truth with which Bargohain is primarily concerned. Wielder of a facile pen, rugged without being rough, lucid without being effeminate, Bargohain's approach to life is invariably psychological. It is true that his characters are often eccentric and morbid, but they are never insipid or uninspiring. *Octopus*, *Barusun*, *Sanatorium*, *Mahaswatar biya* etc. are some of Bargohain's best stories. His collections are *Vivhinna chorus* (1957) and *Prem aru mrittur Karane* (1958).

Mahim Bora has developed a distinctive technique of emotional intensity that is woven round what is generally known as inconsequential subjects; *Chakravat* is an instance in point,—an old dilapidated bicycle unfolding the character of a man and the history of a family. Other instances are *Top* and *Rash*. Bora's characters like Haribal Kaka for instance are faithfully drawn prototypes from life; they are well-rounded and individualised; to the reader attuned to our social types, they appear as familiar persons. In the capacity to sustain suspense as evident from the *Kathanibari ghat*, an emotionally intense story, or *Mach aru manuh*, an illusion made palpable, or *Tinir tini gol*, a vivid atmosphere story, Bora has few rivals; his stories do not stray into innuendos or unwarranted superfluities. Bora's collection is *Kathanibari ghat* (1961).

Nothing in L. N. Bora is camouflaged or improvised, a tendency that is both a hindrance and an advantage. On occasions Bora digresses so much that very often than not it takes away much from the solid dignity of the structure; even a story as emotionally intense as *Sakha Damodar*, a story made real by complication of traits and circumstances, suffers from dull digression. At places it sounds like a veterinary thesis. On the other hand, his *Dwitia* is a simple rural portrait that shows technical finish of a high order. If not by any other standard, Bora is a realist by virtue of his

primary concern for character as also his unusual talent for creating character in whom one comes to take a vivid interest as individuals; his Jikaphuli is such a "normal" character. Like Jogesh Das, Bora writes a story because he wants to tell it and that too without predilections. His collections are *Dristirupa* (1958), *Sei sure utala* (1960), *Kachialir kuwali* (1961), *Mon mati megh* and *Gaurirupak* (1962).

By age Dr. Hem Barua (1890-1958) is affiliated to the past generation and by temperament to the present. Dr. Barua has shown deep understanding and absorption in his stories. Though filtered through years, his pictures of rural life have a strange verisimilitude. He had a keen eye for the characteristic in setting and person; he possessed the power to heighten effect by making a psychological mystery of each case and by wrapping it up in veils of psychoanalytical speculation as in *Jahara*; it is a story in which he has made a serious application of Freudian psychopathological analysis, more pronounced and less subtle of course than Homen Bargohain's *Mahaswatar biya*.

With Saurov Chaliha and Bhaben Saikia, although in diction and mental affiliation both are different, begins the epoch in a sense of "new signatures" in our short story. Psychologically revealing, Saikia's *Sendur* like *Prahari* is emotion made tangible under the searchlight of events and characters. Likewise his *Satkar*, a story that is structurally not without blemish, is evocative of an idiom that is vibrant in its undertone of agony. In it, the imponderables of the situation are made to yield to understanding circumstances and realism of fact. Saikia's stories like *Ganga snan* and *Laj lage* are psychologically subtle and suggestive. The author knows how to weave emotion into psychology, sensitivity into intellectual absorption. Saikia's collection is *Prahari* (1963).

Saurov Chaliha has captured the intellectual idiom of the urbanised landscape as nobody has; he has experimented with new technical devices as evident from stories like *Asanta electron* and *Geometry*, a pattern that touches the deeper layers of consciousness. In him the accepted development of plot which is generally chronological disappears and in its place a complex

and "elusive" progressivism based on the "inter-weaving of recurrent motifs" (*Sihatao pahar bogale, Duparia*) is introduced; this subjectivism in fiction may be said to be akin to modern impressionistic painting. Chaliha's collections are *Asanta electron* (1962) and *Duparia* (1963).

Nirod Chaudhury and Imran Shah are affiliated to one another in more than one sense. Chaudhury's *Komal gandhar* (collections: *Mor galpa, Ange ange sobha*) and Shah's *Akal Basanta* (Collections: *Pia mukha chanda, Bandi bihangame kande*) are sensitive psychological portraits. Though very young, both have shown interest in the abstruse working of the mind which they convey in a language that is naturalistic in diction. Padma Barkataki is not interested in imaginative concentration; he derives vicarious satisfaction in erotic and "escape" impulses as also in depicting intellectual and ethical chaos which is the result of ill-defined conservative morals. This social anomaly he brings out boldly with the precision and passion of journalistic reportage in his collection of stories, *Aslil* (1959). C. P. Saikia's—he writes mostly about urban middle class society and on which account is often described as an extension of Roma Das with a difference—stories like *Grahantar* show the author in a different perspective; *Grahantar* in which characters are sharply delineated in their subtle psychological setting is a story on a higher key.

Other noted short story writers of this generation are Rohini Kakati, Medini Chaudhury, Khirod Saikia, A. N. Goswami, Jadu Borpujari, Bireswar Barua, Kumar Kishore, Kula Gogoi and Jatin Goswami. Of the women writers, Sneha Devi and Pranita Devi remind one of Jogesh Das's qualities while Nilima Sarma reflects C.P. Saikia's attitude in a deeper psychological sense. Nirupama Bargohain and Mamani Goswami (*Chinakimaram*: 1962) are noted for their insight into situation. Alimunnisa Piar, Dolly Talukdar and Hiranyamayee Devi (*Niyar topal*: 1958) are searching in their responses. Anima Bharali (*Beliphatar sapon*: 1963), whose language has the liquid beauty of a flowing stream, is generally melodramatic. Though few, Priti Barua's stories like *Circusar bhaluk, Hill Boy* etc. show emotional awareness and subtle sense of form, qualities that are rarely matched.

prose and essays

APART FROM fictional prose, our general prose, the history of which is on no account less than four hundred years old, marks two significant stages in development. Old Assamese prose, as already pointed out, was ethico-religious. Modern prose, besides administering to aesthetic delight, serves and sustains practical purposes also; this is why T. G. Williams describes prose as "literature of use". Prose is the medium of "precision in thought and language", for, one of its cardinal principles is that it is written under the primary impulse of being understood. This does not mean that prose has to be ratiocinative all through; it can be imaginative also and sustained with certain emotional and artistic quality. It is wrong to describe prose always as "literature in the second degree".

In the renascence of Assamese literature from eclipse, the contributions of the Baptist Mission journal, *Oronodoi*, are of far-reaching significance; broadly speaking, its prose style was modelled on the tradition of Ahom chronicle, its terse and crisp expression, sustained elevation, preference of concrete images over abstractions and amplitude of verbal materials of home-spun flavour that was not embellished with Sanskrit or any other alien touches. The sentences were pithy and occasionally not without epigrammatic brilliance. The desire to use words of local root and colour was germane with the missionaries; often they took the

liberty of coining new words to suit indigenous idiom, a process that not only enriched the existing idiom but also gave it a direction for further enrichment.

The compass of this process was wide; the *Oronodoi* was a journal devoted to "religion, science and general intelligence" and to serve this declared objective, the prose style adopted by this journal had to be more elastic. As we look back through the receding years, we find that the *Oronodoi* tried to give our language a sense of perspective by impressing upon the basic fact that it is a language of distinctive personality. To the prose style initiated by the Rev. Cotter, Nathen Brown (1807-1886) and Miles Bronson (1812-1883), Nidhi Levi Farwell (b. 1827) added his own style, particularly modelled on the traditional Vaishnava idiom. Thus we find two distinctive prose styles in the pages of *Oronodoi*: one, roughly speaking, Ahom chronicle style and the other Vaishnava style prose; the former of course constituted the main stream. Besides poetry, Farwell has to his credit prose writings on subjects like science, law and history. Besides fictional prose, A. K. Gurney (b. 1845) has to his credit translations of certain portions of the New Testament.

It is not correct to say that the Baptist Mission prose style was modelled on the contemporary English style, for, the English style contemporaneous with these Missionary writers was different from what we find in the Assamese *Oronodoi*; neither in syntax nor in sentence construction, do the two styles agree. *Oronodoi* prose, although essentially secular, was of the biblical sermon type which when transmuted into a language, the knowledge of which was elementary with the Baptist Mission writers, took to manneristic forms. They lacked the sense of proper use of words which on occasions unwittingly became malapropistic.

Despite the fact that the Baptist Mission writers lacked basic insight into the syntax of our language, their style was disciplined; this must be said that this discipline was determined by dogma rather than by any clear understanding, even of the spoken speech rhythm of the people. The area of disagreement lay between their mental thought process and a medium of expression that was not

only alien to them but also without any established modern pattern whatsoever. Yet, it is the *Oronodoi* writers to whom must go the credit of not only initiating a modern literary style, but also that of stabilising an idiom that did not exist for modern purposes.

Despite apparent discipline in syntax and diction, the prose of A. R. Dhekial Phukan could not free itself completely from the *Oronodoi* style; to say that his style was correct in the choice of words and it suffered from no malapropistic use is to say the obvious. To be precise, Dhekial Phukan's was a style in the initial stages of development; it tried to be free, and yet it was not free, and that is why he was far from sure-footed in his style. If our prose style reached a distinctiveness and an individual literary idiom, it was in the hands of H. C. Barua (1835-1897). Like Dryden of English prose, Barua can be described as the father of our modern prose; he released it from the fetters of artificiality and made it clear, flexible and urbane to match the social and literary demands of the day. Without sounding alien or artificial, it is on him that the influence of contemporary English literary prose is much more evident. Barua tried to study our language in a scientific manner; he gave it a grammatical basis and an enriched vocabulary and syntax.

Whether through his translated work *Swastharaksha* or social satires like *Bahire rangchang bhitare kowabhaturi*, where language is used as a forceful instrument of social reform and controversy, or through his text books like *Adipath* and *Pathmala* and grammar like *Asamiya byakaran* (1859), H. C. Barua gave the much-needed stability to our language which was till then at the crossroads. *Hemkosh* (1900), a dictionary, is his monumental work. This must be said that Barua enlivened the literary dialogue of his time through constructive work: one grammar (*Asamiya byakaran*), two dictionaries (*Hemkosh* and *Parhasalia abhidan*: 1892), two text-books (*Adipath* and *Pathmala*), besides analytical writings in journals like *Asam Bilasini* (1871-72), *Assam News* (1882-85), *Asam Bandhu* (1885-86), *Mau* (1886), *Asam Tara* (1880-90) and *Lora-bandhu* (1888). It was due to his effort particularly that our language as a vehicle of modern expression got stabilised during the period

from 1859 to 1888; a year after, the *Jonaki* (1889) was born.

H. C. Barua freely borrowed literary idioms from English and gave them an indistinguishable local colour; in his hands "a sleeping fox catches no poultry" became "*sui thaka siale hah dhariba nuware*". This must be said in this connection that, somehow or rather, English syntax fitted into Assamese speech rhythm admirably and H. C. Barua exploited this discovery to advantage. Often his prose acquired an edge when the writer indulged in sarcasm and social satires; it used to lash and bite. But ordinarily, Barua's style is placid and calm.

Gunabhiram Barua (1837-1894) who was inspired ostensibly by the enlightened socio-ethical thought of Raja Rammohan Roy of Bengal is our first in many respects: he is our first playwright (*Ram Navami*: 1857); and he is our first modern historian (*Asam buranji*: 1884). Written in an objective, analytical style, this history is authentic in information and shows the writer's capacity to sift historical materials judiciously. Some of his historical essays are: *Asom atit aru bartaman*, *Saumar bhraman*, *Asomot manar seshchhuwa*, *Alikhit buranji* etc. He is also our first biography writer (*Anandaram Dhckial Phukanar jivan charit*: 1880). Permeated with a sense of reverence, it is in the tradition of Vaishnava *carita puthis*; nevertheless the reference is illuminating and conveyed through a lucidly expressive language.

In G. R. Barua's hands, prose style reflected the same characteristics, suppleness, dignity and seriousness, that one comes across in H. C. Barua's style. What they succeeded in doing was to give naturalness to our prose and a personality to our language that suffered official eclipse for about half a century. Nilkumud Barua's *Jivan darshan* is a well-knit biography of Maniram Dewan; written with a passion, the appraisal, although sentimental on occasions, appears to be authentic. During this period, an interest in history grew steadily. Ratneswar Mahanta (1864-1893), a poet, wrote his notable research article *Joymati Konwari* during this period. Apart from the development of drama prose, between 1857 and 1885 prose grew and got stabilised as an independent medium.

With the *Jonaki* group of writers, a new epoch started; they were dedicated to the cause of imparting to our resurrected language a dynamic local colour as also embellish it with words of Sanskrit origin wherever necessary. Under the auspices of the *Jonaki*, the romantic tradition became a fact. L. N. Bezbarua popularised the personal essay, a form in which nothing suits better than the subjective style. Thus was opened a new avenue for our prose, already evolved into a comprehensive medium under the auspices of H. C. Barua and G. R. Barua of the pre-*Jonaki* affiliation. Through his novels, Rajani Bardoloi popularised a prose style that was both impersonal and objective. One thing must be noted about these prose writers: their sentences hang in an orderly chain of simple, direct statements with few qualifications and less ornament. Broadly speaking, Wordsworth's "experiment" involving a "selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation" produced its salutary effect on the *Jonaki* prose style, thus distinguishing it from the *Oronodoi* pattern.

Of the avowed objectives of the *Jonaki*, two are very significant: (i) evolution of a standard literary language, and (ii) introduction of Vaishnava studies with commentaries, critical notes etc. These aims, among others, produced far-reaching effects on research and initiation of a vigorous literary campaign. During 1849 to 1889, an era of struggle for existence of our language and literature, the main emphasis was not so much on critical evaluation of literature or initiation of a literary trend, but on creative responses to the challenge of alien antagonistic forces; besides, literary criticism is a development of the romantic age even in the west; it was under the impact of western literature of this type that literary criticism grew in our language during and after the *Jonaki* age.

It was in the pages of the *Jonaki* that articles like Ratneswar Mahanta's *Asomot Man*, Lambodar Bora's *Asamiya bhasar jotani*, Bishnu-prasad Goswami's *Sankardev* etc. were published. Besides, literary and personal essays emerged under its auspices and thus was the range of our prose extended into a larger perspective. Basically the novel is an insight into the mind as much as into environment. The language that captures the processes of the inner mind as also

of the outer environment must automatically be elastic and graphic; this is Rajani Bardoloi's contribution to the evolution of our modern prose. L. N. Bezbarua's contribution is manifold, from personal essays to literary appraisal. To be brief, it was under the auspices of the *Jonaki* that an avenue of critical thought and personal emotion in the best romantic tradition was laid bare. Stimulated by this nascent spirit, Deven Bezbarua's *Asamiya bhasa aru sahityar buranji* was published in 1912. D. Bharali's *Asamiya bhasar maulik bichar aru sahiytar chinaki* is another noteworthy work of this genre.

Rajani Bardoloi's prose is analytical, descriptive and picturesque; although localised, it has an unconscious attachment for English syntax. Always graphic and original in images, L. N. Bezbarua's style can be classified into two broad types: (i) prose of his satires and personal essays, and (ii) prose of his critical essays. Hardin Craig is of the opinion that "satirists are peculiarly subject to the misfortune of suffering from ill-will among their contemporaries and misunderstanding among posterity". This is not so with Bezbarua, because he could veneer his prejudices or social anger with a peculiarly plastic style, a pyrotechnic display of wit and imagination. Bezbarua's *Kripabar* (*Barbaruar kakatar topola*: 1904 and *Barbaruar obhatani*: 1909) is essentially Pickwickian; every topic in these sketches is touched with frolic and gentle humour. Bezbarua chooses his words with skilful care and lodges them at strategic places so that they might explode like time-bombs; they do not injure, but scintillate. For suppleness of imageries and illustrations, one must turn to Bezbarua's fictional prose and for critical vision and appraisal to his biographies and literary essays. At its worst his prose was discursive, diffused like the course of his own life.

Broadly speaking, to Bezbarua should go the credit of laying the foundation of our critical studies; his *Sankardev* (1912) is the first serious attempt made to reconstruct Sankardeva's life on the basis of materials available in the *carita puthis*; it is the first authentic attempt to analyse the saint-poet's literary works and ideas. Written in a precise and clear style, it shows his scholarly under-

standing in a discerning focus. Likewise, *Sri Sankardev aru Sri Madhavdev* is another penetrating work of scholarship. Besides, his *Krishna katha*, *Tattakatha* and critical study of *Rukmini harana kavya* and lectures on Vaishnavism delivered at Baroda, all these show depth of scholarship and understanding. Without deviating in any significant manner from the basic prose syntax initiated by H. C. Barua and G. R. Barua, Bezbarua widened its scope to the utmost imaginable extent.

Kamalakanta Bhattacharjya's (1853-1936) prose is radical, ratiocinative and rugged. This ruggedness of style was temperamental with him, for, he wanted to hit hard and at times with almost savage outspokenness. Bhattacharjya was known even in his life time as "*rishi Kamalakanta*"; this asceticism on his part was not due to any Puritan creed, but due to his basic distrust of the human animal in our distorted social context; he loved man in the abstract only. Indignation, said an ancient poet, made verses, but in the case of Bhattacharjya, indignation made not only verses, but also prose of a distinctive quality. His style is scarcely lyrical and impassioned even when his feelings reached the white heat of intensity; it is terse and rugged all through. Bhattacharjya's *Gutidiyak chintar dhau*, *Astrabakra samhita*, *Astrabakrar atmajivani*, *Tupir dokan*, *Mor manat para katha* etc. were serialised in the journal *Banhi* during 1912 and afterwards. His *Kah pantha* (1934) is a noticeable landmark of ratiocinative style.

Hem Goswami (1872-1936), an antiquarian scholar, is noted for his contributions to historical and literary research; *Asamiya sahityar chaneki*, a book in seven volumes published by the Calcutta University and compiled by Goswami, is a monumental work; besides, he has several articles to his credit. Goswami's prose is sensitive to historical facts. P. N. Gohain-Barua's prose may be divided primarily into two phases; (i) prose of non-Sanskritic origin that one comes across in his novels like *Bhanumati* and *Lahori*; it is precise fictional prose. And (ii) prose of conscious effort towards so-called literary elegance, Sanskritic ornate style that one comes across mainly in *Sri Krishna* (1930) and *Gitasar* (1935) and casually also in his historical writings like *Asomar samkhipta*

buranji. In *Sri Krishna*, precisely a religious biography in three volumes, the style is as ecstatic as the approach enthusiastic.

Satyanath Bora (1860-1925) is a conscious stylist. Invariably rich in thought content, there is a crisp argumentative fervour in his prose and a certain discipline also, but the total effect is more often than not manneristic. Whenever he allows his sentences to take a natural course like Benu Sarma's, the effect is nothing but pleasant. This contradictory tendency often got reflected in the same piece of writing; this can be seen from *Jivanar amiya* where the two styles jostle against one another, one natural and the other sullen in abstraction. Given to the task of self-conscious uplift in his essays, as in the purposeful writings of Victorian England, Bora's style was very often than not sententious. His works are *Sarathi* (1915), *Kendra sabha* (1929) and *Chintakali* (1935). Barring some imperceptible influence on his son J. N. Bora, this style had no impact either on his contemporaries or on subsequent writers. J. N. Bora's writings are thought-provoking in a fixed manner. His style has a measure of cadenced firmness; in this he resembles A. G. Rai-Chaudhury more than he resembles his father. With Rai-Chaudhury, the junior Bora has greater spiritual affinity, atleast in his philosophy for Assam (*Asomot bideshi*: 1925). Bora's other works are *Jugatatta* (1924), *Natun jagat* (1946) etc.

Lambodar Bora's (1860-1892) style is passionate and rhythmic, although occasionally figurative embellishments are indelible. Some of his writings like *Sadanandar kalaghumati* do not fit into this description; this suppleness of style is evident in his *Lorabodh* and *Jnanodoy* also. His essays like *Gan*, *Alankar aru darkar*, *Anandaram Barua*, *Kalidas aru Sakuntala* etc. reveal the author's power of comprehension matched with felicitous expression as nothing else. The rhythmic cadence of his prose was often sought to be created by recourse to too many Sanskrit words; such rhetorical embellishments generally divert attention from meaning to form. We must not forget that good prose is for delight as for use. Whatever that may be, that Bora gave balance and equipoise to contemporary prose and tried to model it on the "bejewelled nineties" English fashion, there is no doubt.

Like K. K. Bhattacharjya's verse missing natural "poetical sinews" due mainly to over-exuberance of feeling and thought, A. G. Rai-Choudhury's (b. 1885) prose misses structural balance at times due to similar temperamental disposition; it might be compared to a soldier with a broken knee whose striking power nobody questions. Such striking force acquired by an imaginative choice of words and synonyms noted for vigorous tonal quality is an inherent characteristic of his style. In fact, his writings are a calculated medium to let loose controversial but inspired barques of socio-political thoughts and ideas on the seas of public opinion. Rai-Chaudhury's books are *Ahuti* (1953), *Deka dekarir Veda* (1942), *Jagatar sesh adarsha* (1916) etc.

Nilmani Phukan's (b. 1885) is a synthetic style that flows in natural and unaffected eloquence; the appeal lies in its inherent manly qualities. His works are *Sahitya kala* (1940) and *Chintamani* (1940). Himself an experienced shikari, T. R. Phukan (1877-1939) has written fascinatingly about shikar life in his own inimitable style. He has to his credit a popular book on sexology : *Jaunatatta* (1934).

(i) *Literary Criticism :*

From the Rev. N. Brown and Haribilash Agarwalla's (1842-1931) time to this day, the publication of ancient books and manuscripts has not only helped historical and literary studies, but has also succeeded in building up a tradition of critical appraisal. In our literary criticism, one particular trend is evident, i.e., literature is primarily viewed in its aesthetic, moral and social aspects. The study of literature in the context of social implications, under the impact of Marxian dialectics, is a development of recent times. Dr. B. Kakati was the first to try his hand at critical studies according to scientific principles of literary criticism. Dr. Kakati's (1894-1952) articles like *Sahityat karun rasa*, written when he was a student, reveal an opulence of quotations and references, an unmistakable sign of adolescence and immaturity. Likewise, some of the prefaces attached to poetical collections of some of our well-known poets and writers are nothing but essays in literary exuberance. Nevertheless, his later works show development of critical under-

standing and scholarship that is yet to be matched. Dr. Kakati was a profound scholar both in western and Oriental learning; his crystallised prose bears the indelible impress of a man of great profundity. What he popularised is aesthetic criticism, often not without a scientific basis, and thus opened a new vista of scholarship and critical study. Dr. B. Kakati's works are *Purani Asamiya sahitya* (1940), *Purani Kamrupar dharma dhara* (1955) etc.

It won't be an exaggeration to say that Dr. Kakati was like Arnold's "men of culture" who "laboured to divest knowledge of all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive". The only difference is that Dr. Kakati had not to "labour"; it came spontaneously in his case. The discoveries of his intellect were seasoned with graceful deftness of phrase and idiom. Briefly speaking, in a lucid careful way his style reflects versatility and positiveness of thought.

K. K. Handique (b. 1895), a well-known Sanskrit scholar, has to his credit some intellectually illuminating articles in Assamese like *Anubadar katha*, *Spanish sahityat Romeo Juliet*, *German sahityat sapon natah*, *Greek natakar gan*, *Socratesar mate kavir prakriti* etc. Each of these articles shows the writer's depth of learning and literary understanding. From these essays it seems Handique's inspiration is the familiar style of Greek architectonic discipline to which the writer adds his own natural glow and insight. Whenever the subject admits, as in *Spanish sahityat Romeo Juliet*, it is not that his language always avoided certain romantic attitudes; to be brief, the cardinal feature of Handique's prose style is controlled rhythm wedded to masculine vigour.

J. P. Agarwalla's fictional prose is chiselled and chaste with well-chosen phrases. This is not the impression that one gets from his prose works like *Silpir prithivi* (1949). Agarwalla followed in prose the same direction that Gonesh Gogoi followed in verse i.e. to escape from the harsh and painful realities of life into imaginative thought; precisely speaking, he suffered from a sort of defence reaction,—a muted eloquence that soared whenever he wrote upon aesthetics or cultural subjects; one comes across this type of style particularly in his essay on Bezbarua's Dalimi. J. P.

Agarwalla, a fastidious stylist, loved words specifically for their colour and savour, which he used to array together not because they were suggestive or relevant, but because they were capable of producing curious rhythmic effects; it is needless to say that the effect of such calculated effort is strained picturesqueness. From the point of refinement natural to imaginative prose criticism, Ratna Barkakati's essay on Dalimi and Jinu is the best on the subject. Barkakati was concerned with beauty in style, but his primary insistence, judging from the Sahitya Sabha presidential address (1963), was on that indispensable beauty, *i.e.*, truth in art.

Dimbeswar Neog is our most prolific literary historian; his literary works are *Adhunik Asamiya sahityar buranji* (1937), *Asamiya sahityar buranjit bhumuki* (1945), *Asamiya sahityar buranji* (1957) etc. D. Neog has certain fixed ideas about the history of our literature and whether one agrees with him or not, he advances them with meticulous scholarship. His other books are *Vaishnav dharma atiguri* (1940) *Vaishnav dharma kramabikash* (1943) and *Prag-eitihashik Asom* (1949). D. Neog's prose is matter-of-fact and flexible.

Without apparent exploitation of erudition, Dr. B. K. Barua (1910-1964) is capable of marshalling information into neat idioms, despite his strained and laboured scholarship. Dr. Barua to whom goes the credit of writing two of our half-a-dozen best novels under feminine pseudonyms, Bina and Rashna, is better known as a creative writer than a critic. Barua's *Kavya aru abhi-byanjana* (1941), an analytical though disjointed appraisal of the art of poetry, is primarily based on the well-known Hindi book *Kavya men abhivyanjanavad* by L. N. Sinha and Benedetto Croce's *Aesthetics*, padded with materials borrowed from different sources, both English and Bengali. Dr. Barua's study of poetics is traditional. His other books are *Asamiya katha sahitya* (1950), *Asamiya bhasa aru samskriti* (1957) and *Loka samskriti* (1961). His style is lucid and is not marred by any unnecessary flourish; although he is a painstaking collector of information, there is a strong current, it must be said, of critical impressionism in Dr. Barua.

While Manoranjan Sastri writes (*Sahitya Darshan*: 1961) for a

few, literally for those capable of initiation into an aesthetic cult of scholarly understanding, Trailokya Goswami's syntax (*Sahitya alochana*: 1950) is easy and readily comprehensible. Though they might occasionally suffer from an overtone of learning, both Sastri's and Goswami's sentences without being heavily weighted are well-conducted to considered conclusions; of the two, Goswami is more lucid despite the fact that both are equally precise and concentrated in critical approach. Though apparently both give the impression of being conservative in taste, they are in fact subtly radical in literary judgment and critical attitude.

While Dr. P. D. Goswami writes a terse, moderately intellectual prose (*Sahitya aru jivan*: 1955 and *Asamiya jana sahitya*: 1943), Dr. M. Neog (*Asamiya premgatha*: 1958, *Asamiya giti-sahitya*: 1958, *Asamiya sahityar ruprekha*: 1962) and Dr. S. Sarma (*Asamiya sahityar itibritta*: 1959, *Asamiya sahityar abash*: 1963, *Asamiya natya-sahitya* 1962) write a prose that is expository or polemical without being strongly marked or iterative. Both Dr. Neog and Dr. Sarma speak with a note of authority, but without however giving the impression of any professional pedantry; they make their point clear by discriminative judgment and distribution of emphasis. Dr. P. D. Goswami's style, bereft of emotionality, is impressive in the fusion of knowledge and controlled crispness of exposition.

Bhabananda Datta, who died young, was a brilliant intellect; despite the fact that he suffered from a certain sense of intellectual separatism due to fierce political party affiliation, his writings on literature (*Rabindra prativa*: 1961 etc.) and on social problems particularly were inspired by an impulse for cultural-cum-intellectual regeneration and just human relation in society. Datta's prose style was firm and precise.

Mahendra Bora's *Asamiya kavitar chhanda* (1962) is the first serious attempt in our literature to probe into the field of prosody. Besides intensive study, the work shows the author's capacity for original interpretation and insight; the style is expressive and expository. S. P. Barua's *Natak aru abhinay prasang* (1962), a book on histrionic arts, is undoubtedly one of the most significant contributions of recent times; the author has tried to study our

drama and theatre not in an isolated context, but against a wide canvas of development of these arts elsewhere. The style is well-modulated to the theme, and not a single word is wasted.

Others who have made significant contributions in literary studies are: Uma Sarma (*Kavya bhumi*: 1948), Upen Lekharu (*Asamiya Ramayan sahitya*: 1948) Upen Goswami (*Bhasa aru sahitya*: 1956), Atul Barua (*Sahityar ruprekha*: 1958), Hemanta Sarma (*Asamiya sahityat dristipat*: 1961), Tarini Bhatta (*Sahityar Gatipath*: 1962) and Tirtha Sarma (*Asamiya sahityar gatipath*: 1962). Besides these writers, others who have already made a mark in literary criticism are: Rajani Sarma, Biren Barkataki, Promod Bhatta, J. Sarma-Pathak and Hiren Gohain. Apart from work by individuals, two significant compilations of literary studies prepared by A. S. L. Club, Calcutta, are *Chintakosh* (1936) and *Sahitya aru samalochona* (1941). K. R. Medhi, Upen Lekharu, Dr. B. K. Barua, Dr. M. Neog, Dr. S. Sarma, Dr. P. D. Goswami and H. N. Datta-Barooa in particular have edited and compiled old books and manuscripts, a fact that has not only helped to sustain the tradition originally initiated by the Rev. Brown and Haribilash Agarwalla, but has also helped to maintain a significant sequence of literary development. *Chitra Bhagavata* (1949), published by H. N. Datta-Barooa, is a monumental work.

(ii) *Historical Writings*:

History was a means by which not only our glorious past was resurrected, but was also emphasised through it our faith particularly in liberty and distinctiveness of cultural antiquity. Likewise, the Vaishnava literary past, rich and pan-Indian in character, had to be resurrected to provide a spark to man's intellectual activities under altered socio-political conditions. Historians found great pride and delight in ancient institutions: architectural, spiritual or physical, and thus helped to nourish and maintain national consciousness in the throes of being submerged by alien rule.

Gooch says: "The main duty of the historian is neither eulogy nor invective, but interpretation of the complex processes and conflicting ideals which have built up the chequered life of

humanity." Besides this, the historian should have "critical shrewdness in judging evidence and justness of emphasis redeemed with illuminating insight and learning". When these qualities are combined with literary elegance and imaginative power, history imbibes the spirit of literature. Compared to some of the "amateurs", whose brilliance is not doubted, Dr. S. K. Bhuyan (1894-1964) is found to be much better equipped with the technique and apparatus of research. That quite a few of the amateurs do suffer from a sort of non-scientific credulous psychosis, to whom Arimatta is as much a historical figure as Chakradhvaj Singha, is a fact. As a historian K. L. Barua (*Early History of Kamarupa*) is in the tradition of Sir E. A. Gait (*History of Assam*), Dr. Bhuyan is not. A professor of English literature, he has instilled into his editions and compilations of history a mellowed freshness; he wields a pen that has the objective terseness of Ahom chronicles and the spontaneity of English syntax. Dr. Bhuyan's notable books are *Ahomor din* (1918), *Konwar vidroh* (1948), *Ramani gabharu* (1951), *Buranjir bani* (1951), *Mirjumlar Asom akraman* (1956) etc.

Benudhar Sarma is a serious scholar; he has made significant contributions to historical research by making unknown facts of history known. Except in *Deshadrohi kon*, *Purnananda ne Badan* where he tries to give some sort of an interpretation of the forces making this particular epoch significant, Sarma is, strictly speaking, not an interpreter of history. Even in *Maniram Dewan* (1950), except making the book informative and melodramatic, there is no attempt to interpret the historically complex personality of Maniram Dewan whose ambitions in the larger context were feudalistic rather than radically revolutionary. His other works are *Satawan chhal* (1946), *Durbin* (1951), *Congressar kachiwali rodat* (1959) etc. Sarma's style throbs with naturalness and becomes transparent only when he is less self-conscious. Otherwise it tends to become uneven, puerile and manneristic: only a casual glance at the first paragraph of *Maniram Dewan* will convince one of it; mysteriously enough, these two styles, one natural and the other stilted, jostle against one another throughout the book. In this connection, we should remember that a style cannot be said to

gain in strength or beauty simply because it uses obsolete words or gives the impression of eccentricity. The qualities of strength and beauty can be assured to prose only by the "finer use of words still in use". Barring such evident mannerisms, Sarma's prose style is homespun and it is on this basic quality that the captivating grace of his style rests rather than on his unsound linguistic theories. To quote Dr. Johnson: "He that has studiously formed a style, rarely writes afterwards with complete ease." This constitutes the core of Sarma's style.

With Dr. S. K. Bhuyan and Benu Sarma, mention may be made of Sarbananda Rajkumar, Dr. P. C. Chaudhury and also Lila Gogoi. Rajkumar's sense of history is as mature as his style is meticulous; he writes a cool and calculated prose, presenting historical facts in a neat idiom, without giving any unrelated evidence of exuberance of feeling or sentimental melodrama. Apart from his massive research work in English, *The History of Civilization of the People of Assam* (1959), Dr. Chaudhury's presidential address at the history section of the Assam Sahitya Sabha (*Nazira session*) shows considerable critical insight and understanding of the forces of history; his prose is unobtrusive and marked by a certain dignity of expression. Though young in years, Lila Gogoi has made worthwhile contributions to historical research already; his style is neither manneristic nor staccato. The syntax is not obtrusive; it is firmly present beneath the lucidly agitated surface of his style. Gogoi's books are *Buranjiye parasa nagar, Harowa dinar katha* (1958) and *Ahomjati aru Asamiya samskriti* (1961). Nakul Bhuyan, better known as a historical playwright, has given in *Bara Bhuyan* (1961) an illuminating study of a less known chapter of our history. Others of the older generation who have written historical prose are Ananda Agarwalla (*Kamarupar purabritta*), Rajani Padmapati (*Purani Asomat bhumuki*: 1910), Hem Goswami (*Purani Asomar buranji*: edited in 1922) and Sonaram Chaudhury. Those of the subsequent generation are: R. M. Nath (*Gaurabmoy Asom*: 1949, *Vir Chilarai*: 1949), D. Neog (*Prageitihashik Asom*: 1949), Dr. B. K. Barua, P. D. Chaudhury, P. Gogoi, K. N. Dutt, B. Handique, D. K. Deva-Sarma (*Kamakhya Tirtha*: 1949) and

Dr. Lakshmi Devi. Besides these writers, many more without any capital distinction of form or thought have written on similar subjects and brought the perspective of history into an understanding focus.

(iii) *Philosophical and Scientific Writings:*

Among writers on philosophical subjects, undoubtedly the most outstanding is Radha Phukan (1875-1964). Originally a student of physics, A. S. Eddington, James Jeans and others, Phukan's metaphysical writings establish the fact that knowledge at the highest level is indivisible and cannot ordinarily be compartmentalised. Modern thinkers are of the opinion that our knowledge of the physical world in terms of mathematical abstractions is only a "conceptual model" of reality. In his attempt to understand physical reality and frame a vision based on it, Phukan has combined metaphysics with mathematically precise reasoning; in metaphysics, he is an idealist. Phukan's books are *Samkhya darshan* (1949), *Vedanta darshan* (1951), *Kathare Upanishad* (1954) *Janmantar rahashya* (1957) etc. Despite copious writings on Vaishnava ethics and philosophy, the philosophical idiom as also the idiom of science are yet to be postulated in our language. And this is why, despite the sweep and amplitude of his discerning intelligence, Phukan's style is generally devoid of literary grace; it is antique prose, polemical at its best. Nevertheless, Phukan's books "soothe the care and lift the thoughts of man".

In the depth of appraisal and understanding, one Sanskrit scholar who approximates Radha Phukan is Manoranjan Sastri. His *Asom Vaishnav darshanar ruprekha* (1954) is a scholarly study of an ethical system so far subjected to critical analysis according to certain established mental norms; this study is an intellectual departure. He writes a prose that combines naturalness with flexibility, grace with force and alacrity with precision. Intellectually abstract, Sastri's approach is interpretative like Radha Phukan's rather than reproductive according to a botanical collector's tenets. Sarat Goswami's (Jr.) *Socrates, Plato aru Aristotle* (1952), *Confucius* (1956) and *Manobijnan* (1958) are new

titles by a professor of ethics and moral philosophy in our language. Goswami's style is neither heavy nor abstruse; it is direct and unobtrusive. Maulana Tayebulla's *Unmul Koran* (1959) is another noteworthy book of religio-ethical interpretation. In this connection, Alimunnisa Piar's *Poharar Poth* (1963), a religio-philosophical dissertation done in a style that is quiet like an autumn brook, might also be mentioned.

Under the influence of Freud, Jung and Adler, the study of psychology with emphasis particularly on the unconscious and irrational motivations of the mind has grown. Dr. H. N. Sarma-Bardoloi's various articles on the subject of psychoanalysis published in different journals are, in depth of understanding and study, the best so far written in our language. Dr. Bardoloi writes a coolly controlled critical prose. Devidas Neog's articles on the subject are similarly deep and illuminating. Nilima Datta (*Sisu vikash*: 1955), Anandi Konwar (*Sishu Monovijnan*: 1949) and Lakshyahira Das have to their credit some illuminating writings on child psychology. Despite expansive science teaching, our scientific literature is poor; except what appears as "science news" in journals, it is almost non-existent. Prof. Saroj Datta writes on science in our journals today as Dr. R. K. Barua used to write in the *Awahon*. Except Dr. R. K. Barua's *Vijnanar sadhu* (1943), Md. Kudrat-i-Khuda's *Vijnanar vichitra kahini* (1951), Dipen Sarma's *Vijnanar vishmoy batari* (1956), M. N. Mahanta's *Albert Einstein aru apekshikatavad* (1956) and Prof. B. K. Tamuli's *Visharashya* (1960), although some of these are elementary in knowledge, there has been no noteworthy publication on science so far.

(iv) *Biographical and other Writings*:

Likewise, except *Swararekhat Bargita* (1959), a notable research work published by the Assam Sangit Natak Akademi and *Bargita-swaralipi* (1944) by G. C. Khaund, no serious study in the fine arts has so far been made. Wirtten in a smooth expressive style, Suresh Goswami's *Bhazratiya nirtya kala* (1963) is an illuminating work on the Indian dances, including the Kamarupi type. Journal-articles as also the presidential address at the cultural symposium

of the Assam Sahitya Sabha (1963) of Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, who has helped to resuscitate our music into a varied idiom, are scintillating in analysis and insight. Dr. Hazarika writes a simple, rhythmic prose.

Our modern biographical literature has registered a significant departure from the *carita puthi* style; it has come to become less formalistic and more comprehensive in outlook and appraisal; with the personality under study are also depicted the forces that have helped him to grow into dimension. It is said that biography means re-appraisal of life with reverence. It is true that the needed reverence is there in an impressive manner, but, on no account whatsoever it has been allowed to vitiate the vision of reality and relevance in our modern biographical writings. Some notable biographies are Dr. S. K. Bhuyan's *Gopalkrishna Gokhale* (1916) and *Anandaram Barua* (1920), P. N. Gohain-Barua's *Jivani samgraha* (1915), Mahadev Sarma's *Buddhadev* (1914) and *Mohammad charit* (1928), S. Sarma-Kataki's *Satyanath Borar jivan charit* (1917), Haron Sarma's *Joan d'Arc* (1918) and *Kamal Pasha* (1931), Atul Barua's *Saratchandra Goswami chamujivani* ((1929), K. Chaliha's *Vishwarashik Bezbarua* (1939), G. N. Bardoloi's *Tarunram Phukan* (1940), Nalini Devi's *Smriti tirtha* (1948) and *Vishwadipa* (1961), Benu Sarma's *Gangagovinda Phukan* (1950), Dr. P. D. Goswami's *Europar manisi pachgaraki* and Biren Barkataki's *Khojate milau khoj* (1956).

Dr. M. Neog's *Sri Sri Sankardeva* (1948) is a facile scholarly study of Sankardeva and his ethico-literary ideas. Writing about this saint-poet of Assam, all writers, including Dr. Neog, do so generally "on this side of idolatry" as did Hazlitt and Coleridge about Shakespeare; nonetheless it would be unfair to suggest that Dr. Neog has tried to judge Sankardeva in the neo-classic manner of pre-fixed rules. Whether serialised in journals or published in book-form, there are some interesting autobiographies written by people like L. N. Bezbarua, P. N. Gohain-Barua, Benudhar Rajkhowa, J. Barooah, Nalini Devi and Padma Chaliha. Autobiography, it must be remembered is not primarily an ego-centric art; too much of "I"-ism spoils its tenor and unfortunately Chaliha's

Jivan binar sur (1963) has not succeeded in overcoming it. Apart from giving a sensitive portrait of contemporary prison and political life, Maulana Tayebulla's *Karagarar chithi* (1962) gives also the image of the man behind the scenes.

Critical appraisal of different phases of civilisation is being carried on in recent times with enthusiastic interest. B. N. Sastri's *Bharatiya sahitya aru samskriti*, where the author brings a wide cultural range into a sharp focus, is a milestone in this field. Dr. M. Neog's *Purani Asomiya samaj aru samskriti* (1957) is a significant sidelight on our cultural history. Likewise, Dr. B. Kakati's *Kalitajati itibritta* (1943) is an erudite sociological study of the Kalitas. P. K. Barua's *Buddha Goya kiman durat* (1961) discusses the problem of world peace in an exhilarating context; the style is convincing and informative. Bijoy Bhagavati's *Gandhivad* (1948) discusses Gandhiji's philosophy in a comprehensive way; his *Samikha* (1961) is an illuminating book on an international subject-matter. Bhagavati's prose is suave and sweeping within the outline of restrained limits. Dr. Bhuban Das's *Manavar adikatha* and *Vivartanar pathat manav* (1960) are studies of primitive stages of civilisation written with expert knowledge. Nakul Bhuyan's *Chah bagichar banuwa* (1960), an intimate study of tea-garden life, is fascinating reading; it is a book rewarding for all. Lila Gogoi's *Simantar mati aru manuh* (1963) is a study of our tribal people on the north-eastern mountains written with sympathy and understanding. Here Raghu Chaudhury's *Navamallika* (1958) that does not come within any of these categories might also be mentioned; it is a pleasant collection of personal essays that shows the ranging mind of a solitary poet as does H. R. Deka's *Alakalai chithi* (1950). Dr. Lalit Barua's *Ela bhanitilai mukali chithi* (1955), a book on sexology, is written like T. R. Phukan's *Jaunatatta* (1934) with an eye to popular needs.

Except novels, perhaps memoirs of travels are read more than any other book and it is more so if the romance of travel is tinged with certain literary colour and picturesqueness. Our most noteworthy travel memoirs are J. Barooah's *Bilatar chithi* (1948), Dr. B. K. Barua's *Switzerland bhraman* (1948), Dr. A. Guha's *Soviet-*

deshat abhumuki (1958), Dr. P. D. Goswami's *Vilatat satmah* (1958), Badjan's *Dui September* (1958), Abdus Sattar's *Bideshat dudinman* (1958), Dr. Lalit Barua's *Europar batat* (1957), Dr. P. C. Goswami's *Baideshika*, Kanak Mahanta's *Bagatara ranga akash* (1962), Mrs. J. B. Barua's *Akashpathedi bideshaloi*, H. N. Dutta-Barooa's *Bharat bhraman* (1945) and Hemanta Sarma's *Kavarir pare pare* (1963). Naba Barua and Abdul Malik who visited the Soviet Union on a cultural programme have written fascinating memoirs of their experiences in journals. All these writers have shown the capacity to enliven the savoury picturesqueness of unfamiliar lands and people as also underline significant experiences with naturalness and ease.

In *belles lettres*, the appeal lies principally in verbal skill and intimate personal touch calculated to make even relatively insignificant details interesting reading. This informal and discursive essay has proved itself to be a flexible medium; with entertainment rather than instruction as its accepted aim, it comes very near to Dr. Johnson's definition of the essay as "loose sally of the mind". It is loose, for, it is not closely fettered by any ostensible theme; noted for its idiosyncratic style, this type of essay by its very nature is self-revealing. Through the personal essays of A. A. Milne, Hillaire Belloc's *On Anything* and G. K. Chesterton's *Tremendous Trifles*, this informal, intimate style for the first time came into literary vogue; the first to write an essay of this type in our language under A. A. Milne's inspiration was Munin Barkataki; his *Confessions* was published in the *Awahon* during the late thirties. The style of *belles lettres* is conversational like after-dinner dialogues stretching far beyond midnight. Some of the noteworthy *belles lettres* of this period are Kumar Madhusudan's *Kimacharjyam* (1950), Tilak Hazarika's *Adda* (1958) and *Kata Katha* (1960), Bhadra Bora's *Ardhang tyajeti* (1957) and *Madhurena* (1961), Hem Sarma's *Batar dubariban* (1957) and *Swagata* (1963), Premnarayan's *Rasamadhuri* (1959) and Dr. Hern Barua's (1890-1958) *Chapania* and *Morgharkhan*. Although Dr. Barua's *Navagraha* (1954) is often classified as *belles lettres*, in fact, it is not so. It is, strictly speaking, a collection of popular essays on science told in the *belle lettres* style. Though

told in the *belles lettres* style, Lila Gogoi's *Coupling singa rail* (1961) has a reformative purpose behind it. Like Bezbarua, Madhusudan and Bhadra Bora are colloquial, but unlike their predecessor, they are colloquial within the bounds of good taste that is legitimately allowed by the abstractness of the subject-matter. In conclusion, this must be said that even in his informal essays, Dr. Barua is a penetrating psychoanalyst.

(v) *Conclusion :*

The immediate pre-War and succeeding post-War years constitute our "miscellaneous and uneasy" period: the War had not, however, heralded any meaningful departure in our literary history, except producing superficial influences here and there; the symphony has no doubt lost its harmony, but no new tune is as yet set to restore timbre to what is a discordant note. There has been little or no criticism of marked originality during this period; whatever criticism is there is informed and discriminatory literary comment. This is not how a great epoch in literature is born.

In this respect, certain basic facts about our language are to be taken note of: (a) Under the auspices of the American Baptist Mission who restored our language from stagnant and moribund conditions, Sibsagar in eastern Assam was accepted as the centre of standard literary language, for, it was the home of the new renaissance that the missionaries initiated. Now things have changed: today it is Gauhati and not Sibsagar that has steadily emerged as a centre of our new standard literary idiom. For, (i) Gauhati is the most expansive centre of learning for the younger generation, and (ii) it is the meeting ground of different dialectical variations of the Assamese language, not to speak of other Indian languages, out of which the new literary language that generally finds expression in prose is steadily evolving. (b) Compared to pre-War prose, present-day prose is getting more and more divorced from home-spun diction and its place is steadily being usurped by a consciously stimulated literary elegance. Besides, there is a tendency today to synthesise style, stimulate it with greater elasticity, liberate it from tradition and make it capable of embracing a wider range of

subject-matter, from social, economic and political to other human complexes. Naturally, our present-day prose style has tended to become more synthetic. (c) It is not sufficiently correct to say that our present-day prose reflects the contemporary English style; whatever affinity between the two is discernible is superficial at the best. Contemporary English style is remarkable for its lucid expressiveness even on highly intellectual subjects; it is not the "load" style, mis-called intellectual style, we are familiar with in our present-day prose. Expansion of ideas from religion to art, from philosophy to science has made greater demands on our language; because of this increased responsibility, it is sought to be made more dynamic, partly by multiplication of derivate forms from existing roots, but mainly by fresh borrowings from Sanskrit and other sources. Yet, it must not be forgotten that even in our present-day writings, both the styles, one abstruse and intellectual and the other spontaneous and homely, run parallel without any tangible clash of interests.

present-day poetry

MOST OF the present-day Assamese poets are university-bred; this fact of higher English education has naturally urbanised their mental makeup to a large extent. This is a phenomenon of deeper significance; this has resulted in the divorce of the real life of the people and the soil that sustains them from the ambit of literary creation.

Literature like art can flourish better and in a more fruitful way in the piping times of peace. Not to speak of the 1962 Chinese aggression, this frontier State of Assam had had the tragic experience of the last World War. It was through this land that the evacuees from wartorn Burma in their thousands, maimed and battered, streamed back to their respective homes or relief centres in India. It was in this State where the Allied troops were massed for action against the Japanese invaders. In the wake of all this, there came untold sufferings for the people, want, starvation and uncertainty all around.

Naturally under these conditions of disorder literature could not progress. The realisation of the fact that war is a "bestial affair", to use Anatole France's words, together with the realisation of the disastrous effects of war on civilisation made poets and literary artists conscious of a social function. The dynamic character of literature lies in its capacity to adjust itself to the spirit of the time; it was during these War-years that poetry of the progressive school

emerged in our literature. Thus, literature was harnessed to the task of effecting national consciousness by diverting attention to problems on the popular level; in this the progressive school drew its inspiration primarily from the socio-economic system in Soviet Russia and the technique employed by some of the English poets of the thirties of this century.

The argument was : If T. S. Eliot could describe, without violating the cardinal principles of art, modern civilisation and its environment with its sordid lust, its flat commercial cosmopolitanism that is as shoddy as it is "unreal", why cannot we? We learn from the *Introduction to Poems from Spain* that poets and poetry have played a significant part in the Spanish War, because to them, the struggle of the Republicans was a struggle for conditions without which the reading and writing of poetry was impossible. Thus, a vigorous plea for the dissolution of hidebound social and national illusions became for a time being the subject-matter of poetry under the auspices of our progressive school; according to the poets of this school, it was time for the new poets to rouse humanity from its long and indolent torpor, its profitless dreaming. This naturally led to the desire for exactness and truth in poetry without however sacrificing aesthetic effects. For, the poets, despite their progressive ideas, knew that art cannot be all propaganda : it is neither algebra nor arithmetic.

As evident in Indian poetry elsewhere, Assamese poetry of the forties registered a new departure; there has been a marked difference in technique and subject-matter of our contemporary poetry. To be precise, the study of Marxian dialectics and Freudian psychopathology has led to re-thinking and to newer attitudes and expressions in the light of it. The old *fin-de-siecle* spirit was fast losing its grip; there had been an initial departure from the delight in colour, beauty and "the love of the moth for the star" type of the preceding era of romantic poetry. The individual ego was no longer "singled out, built in and sung to". The rudimentary appeal of Marxism for the lower middle class poets was irresistible, and that too against the background of chaos and disorder of modern society. In the world of despiritualised values, it at least

provided "something" to repose one's faith in. Although as an empirical theory Marxism has a sound basis, as a source of poetic inspiration it has not been able to achieve any tangible aesthetic success anywhere in the world.

Poets, says Herbert Read, bear the same relation to society as the antennae of an insect to its body; this is socially conscious poetry. The struggle for freedom and the dream of a sovereign socialist society gave an impetus to this poetry in our country. The poets saw the vision of a new India in the sunshine of freedom, an India free from the "infections of incalculable despair" due to social injustice and economic imbalance. This tendency was ushered into Indian literature of different regional languages during the thirties of the century, and in some cases it lasted till the closing years of the forties. If these "new vistas" opened for Malayalam poetry in 1936, it was 1939 for Kannada poetry, and the rest of the Indian poetry followed almost an identical time schedule.

This progressive poetry tried to vindicate the rights of the toiling masses in field and factory from capitalist exploitation. Thus, the leftists and surrealists registered protests against what they described as escapism and soft sentiments of the romantic school. The type of inspiration that the progressive school of Indian poets drew from contemporary English poetry can best be illustrated by reference to the following passage from MacNeice's poetry :

They cannot live, once their idols are turned out,
None of them can endure, for how could they, possibly, without
The flotsam of private property, pekingese and polyanthus,
The good things which in the end turn to poison and pus,
Without the bandy chairs and sugar in their silver tongs,
And the inter-ripple and resonance of years of dinner gongs?

Not only English poets, but poets like Mayakovsky of Soviet Russia and Antonio Machado of Spain also had their impact.

This political-cum-social absorption that one comes across in world literature was made popular through a series of articles published in the *Awahon* during the late thirties of this century; thus was a new resurgence in our literature initiated that drew poets and

artists alike away from the world of romantic dreams into the world of cold facts. The central idea projected through these articles can be illustrated in the words of Mayakovsky thus :

‘Why must I write about the love of Jack and Jill and not consider myself part of the social organism which is building life?’

This new trend in our literature first made its appearance during the forties of this century under the auspices of a monthly journal called *Jayanti* (1943) under the distinguished editorship of Kamal-narayan Dev.

The *Jayanti* era in our literature is historically significant; it marked a protest and registered a departure from the traditional romantic ideals of the preceding era. This poetry was critical, socially conscious and, as traditionalists would say, anarchic in technique and subject-matter; but to be fair, it was the poetry of human values realised and expressed with a conscience. The pioneer poem of this type was *Puja*. This poem that presents a contrast between two social norms, one, a world of wealth, luxury and pomp represented by the privileged few and the other, one of miseries and misfortunes of the unprivileged many, is historically significant in the sense that it created an atmosphere for “new signatures” in our poetry. Amulya Barua (1922-1946) who fell a victim in the Great Calcutta Killing took up this inspiration subsequently and produced some notable poems like *Kukur*, *Vashya* etc. Though not the pioneer of the progressive school of poetry nor the innovator of its technique, Amulya Barua was the most outstanding of this generation of poets. This progressive poetry can generally be called revolutionary in the sense that a tradition had collapsed and in its place it made the discovery of new frontiers of poetry possible and achievable. Poetry was no longer a “mad nymph locked in a prism”.

This poetry that was invariably addressed to a specific purpose and termed progressive poetry had a brief existence only : it failed to emerge into a comprehensive literary attitude and neither *Puja* nor *Kukur* or *Vashya* succeeded in striking deeper psychological roots. Somehow or other, poetry of the progressive school

declined into the backyard of history as abruptly as it emerged into vogue. It happened so either because conditions in an industrially backward economy as ours did not warrant it or because it could not acquire an edge of beauty, that "sincerity in art", spoken of by Aldous Huxley which constitutes the life-spirit of all creations of "talents". Besides, although it is a fact that the greatest art creates its own age, there is the problem of poet-audience relationship also, a fact, if ignored, affects all aesthetic creations.

True it is that there are people who are starved, people who have been cheated of the fair value of their work, but, when these problems, the cry of the dispossessed are projected without any aesthetic appeal or reason, it is bound to fail as literary creation. Art cannot subserve the dictates of a political platform. In an industrially backward State like Assam where conditions emerging out of industrial complexes do not exist, how is it possible to create poetry of "the chisel and the roller"? Art in its purest manifestation is always timeless.

Although progressive poetry as such declined into non-existence, the interest it created in social-cum-political problems caught on; during the post-War period one comes across some ennobling specimens of socially conscious poetry under the auspices of the *Pachuwa* (1948-49) and the *Ramdheni* (1951). Biren Bhatta, Ram Gogoi and Abdul Malik have produced a few fine specimens of socially conscious poetry during this period. Malik's and Bhatta's focus of interest is primarily on the problems of lower middle class society. Ram Gogoi's poetry has a Marxist touch, not of the book-learned type, but one that springs from self-realisation due to the natural contact that the poet has with the vital springs of our life. In Biren Bhatta's (b. 1927) *Bishnu Rava atia kiman rati*, Malik's (b. 1919) *Phulsariyar rati* and Mahendra Bora's (b. 1929) *Kerani Shelleyir chithi*, this tendency had attained a success that the poets of the preceding progressive group could not dream of. This is of course inevitable in all pioneering work. One must not forget that their major contribution was in the field of technique; they popularised *vers libre* and sprung verse techniques which were further developed by the subsequent generation of poets.

In this new technique, ideas generally found a compressed expression; with it were also compressed the sound-values of the poem, the "rhythm often coming in the middle of the line, instead of being set like a milestone at the end of every five stress". This is seen that these poets give the impression of being deficient in sensual and emotional exuberance when compared to the romantic poets; nevertheless, the poems produced by them are inevitably works of art. The calculated opposition to romantic superfluity in language is one of the reasons for the popularity of sprung verse. For, in a nutshell, sprung rhythm is "nearest to the rhythm of prose, that is the native and natural rhythm of speech".

The attitude to life and problems of the *Pachuwa-Ramdhenu* group of poets is more positive and comprehensive than that of the *Jayanti* group. This is why the poetry of the *Jayanti* group did not have more than a superficial contemporary appeal. It was a modern equivalent of "occasional verse", to be precise, and in the case of *Jayanti* poetry its appeal was too brief to be of any significance. It is said that "any poetry which implies a passionate faith in anything can be called propaganda". What the *Jayanti* poets lacked was "passionate faith" even in the cause they were supposed to espouse. Their poetry was as much propaganda as the "work of the Georgian poets was propaganda for the breweries and for walking tours".

It is true that poets like Biren Bhatta, Ram Gogoi and Abdul Malik are dissatisfied with the existing conditions of life and society; this dissatisfaction has led them towards pre-occupation with social problems, for, to say in the words of Day Lewis, "this world they inherited seemed to possess neither a moral tradition nor a satisfactory economic system". A poet's faith like a woman's love is his whole existence; political or other faiths are no hindrances provided they inspire poets to write good poetry. Under modern circumstances a poet cannot be an "autist", to borrow a word from psychology. To say in other words, a modern poet is truly a "vocal son of man" in the sense that he is not selfish and confined to his own world of self-imposed limitations.

Dissatisfaction at times leads to "attraction of surrealism".

Apart from it, the new poetry has become poetry of ideas; it is the second phase of development in our poetry, fostered by the *Ramdhenu*. To say in the words of H. V. Routh (*English Literature and Ideas in the Twentieth Century*): "The study of twentieth century literature is inseparable from ideas." We find in our poetry of this generation, particularly under the influence of T. S. Eliot, ideas from different sources of thought and knowledge cross-fertilising each other. As evident from the writings of the younger group of English poets, surrealism carried the "modified anarchism of the earlier Auden-MacNeice work to its technical extreme". Naba Barua's (b. 1926) reply to partisan attitude and to too much involvement in political polemics of the nature of the *Jayanti* poets was surrealism; he explored the subconscious and created poetry of a varied plumage. His poetry is communication and unlike what Walter de la Mare has said about poetry, it is not a "record", except that which is expressed as the quintessence of the subconscious.

The last World War is responsible for producing a sort of morbid psychology in European poetry of the time. Although the War had had a physical impact to some extent in Assam, Assamese poetry of the post-War period is free from such a psychological fact.

Art is neither for the sake of art as the aesthete imagines nor for the sake of ethics as the moralist opines; it is for the sake of life. This interest in life is not merely physical; it is concerned with the psychological and subconscious aspect also. Dr. Groddeck (*The World of Men*) says: "While the outside view of things was changing under the impact of new ideas and discoveries in physics, the ego was also being explored, and it is in this context that we come across the name of Freud." Jung who is described as the "Plato of psychoanalysis" opened the frontiers of ideas further. Thus the recent tendency in Assamese poetry is to make the objective more subjective and the subjective more objective in the sense that it is made more vivid, thus weaving the conscious and the subconscious into a distinct pattern of passion and precision. This interest in the subconscious in our literature is largely stimulated by studies of Freud, Jung and Adler particularly.

There are two worlds: (i) phenomenal and (ii) noumenal. Marxism and physics deal with the first whereas psychoanalysts deal with the second. In the context of today, the frontiers between the two are dissolving and a synthesised pattern of the two extremes is emerging. It is said in *Cambridge English Literature* thus: "Philosophers now explain psychological phenomena in physical terms; physicists give metaphysical interpretations of natural phenomena." This fact has produced a powerful impact on present-day literature and nothing reflects this marriage of science and philosophy better than present-day poetry of the intellectual type. Science and metaphysics have given birth to new ideas and attitudes about time and continuity. Thus, the ego of the sectarian group of *Jayanti* poets is broken and disintegrated.

Symbolism, a French technique, is employed to explore the noumenal world and discover meaning for the world of consciousness that is not apparent as such. The interest was concentrated on what Bergson says "the indivisible flux of consciousness". For the symbolists, poetry was an art that "should not inform, but suggest and evoke, not name things, but create their atmosphere". (C. M. Brown: *The History of Symbolism*). Mallarme is of the same opinion when he says that "to name an object is to do away with three-quarters of the enjoyment of the poem". The influence of T. S. Eliot through whom French symbolist technique was primarily communicated to the English poets of the generation is pronounced on the *Pachuwa-Ramdheni* genre of Assamese poets. It is the reading of T. S. Eliot by our poets of this generation, most of whom are university-bred, that made the French symbolist technique popular in our literature. Homen Bargohain (b. 1931), Mahendra Bora, Dinesh Goswami and Nilmani Phukan (Jr.) are interested in the "innermost flickering of the human heart", and yet, the phenomenal world is not lost sight of. Mahendra Bora appears to be on the periphery of this cycle; the technique employed by all the three, except Bora, is symbolist. It is the thick veneer of intellectualism that makes Bora's poetry an exception. Whatever that may be, this is the first authentic attempt to give to our poetry

a new direction on the line of French symbolist poetry initiated by Mallarme and Valery.

Further, it must be noted that of late there has been an obvious swing in the pendulum; this is towards romantic poetry again in a more comprehensive sense. This must be said in this connection that the only poet of this generation who has held on to romantic poetry is Hari Barkakati (*b.* 1927); his poetry is of course romantic with a difference. Perhaps this tendency was inherent in a sense in the poetry of Homen Bargohain, Mahendra Bora, Dinesh Goswami and Nilmani Phukan (Jr.), for, to say in the words of Issac, symbolist poetry was just a "second wave of the romantic poetry". This is true of recent English poetry also. Lawrence Durrell says: "To us, living in the fifties, it seems that the pendulum has swung out very far in the direction of the romantic or the mystical." The technique employed in this romantic poetry is different from what obtains in the romantic poetry of the previous era. There is no unnecessary "metrical verbiage" in it. It is marked by a precision of imagery and economy of words rather than by vague romantic profusion. Our notable poets of this generation are Keshav Mahanta, Nirmalprava Bardoloi, Bireswar Barua, Biren Barkataki, Sushil Sarma, Harekrishna Deka, Hiren Gohain, Nalini Bhatta, Bhagagiri Rai-Chaudhury, Gunabhi Chaudhury, Radhikamohan Bhagavati, Biren Bargohain, Hiren Bhatta, Ratna Oja, Amalendu Guha, Ravindra Bora, Saiduddin Ahmed, Anandeswar Sarma, Prafulla Bhuyan, Bhaben Barua and Benu Chiring. Except about a dozen of these poets, the rest have not succeeded so far in capturing the modern idiom.

To be brief and at the same time panoramic is the poets' problem today. Our present-day poetry is marked by "passion, music and precision", the qualities of good poetry as adumbrated by Day Lewis. To sum up: present-day Assamese poetry is vibrant with a spirit of moral independence and social criticism; the free search of new values is on the ascendant and the apostles of traditionalism who usually charge present-day poetry as "obscure" are neither the more numerous nor the more eminent. Our literature has produced really more good poets from the forties of this century

to the present-day than during any period of an identical span after the early 16th century, *i.e.*, from the time of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. This might sound hyperbolic, but then, how to deny a statement that can be established by facts?

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21. ATLAS OF INDIA	Dr. S. P. Chatterjee, Director, National Atlas Organisation, Calcutta.
22. PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY OF INDIA	Prof. C. S. Pitchamuthu, Head of the Department of Geography, Erskine College of Natural Sciences, Waltair.
23. RIVERS OF INDIA	Mrs. Vasantha Krishnan, Formerly Lecturer, Queen Mary's College, Madras.
24. ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY OF INDIA	Prof. V. S. Gananathan, Department of Geography, University of Poona, Poona.
25. GEOGRAPHY OF ANDHRA PRADESH	Dr. V. L. S. Prakasha Rao, Prof. & Head of the Department of Geography, Osmania University, Hyderabad.
26. GEOGRAPHY OF BIHAR	Prof. Enayat Ahmed, Head of the Department of Geography, Ranchi College, Ranchi.

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| 27. GEOGRAPHY OF DELHI | Dr. M. P. Thakore, Head of the Department of Geography, K. M. College, University of Delhi, Delhi. |
| 28. GEOGRAPHY OF GUJARAT | Prof. (Smt) V. A. Janaki, Head of the Department of Geography, University of Baroda, Baroda. |
| 29. GEOGRAPHY OF MADRAS | Dr. (Miss) A. R. Irawaty, Principal, Queen Mary's College, Madras. |
| 30. GEOGRAPHY OF MADHYA PRADESH | Dr. K. N. Varma, Prof. & Head of the Department of Geography, Govt. Hamidia Arts and Commerce College, Bhopal. |
| 31. GEOGRAPHY OF MAHARASHTRA | Dr. C. D. Deshpande, Director of Education, Government of Maharashtra, Poona. |
| 32. GEOGRAPHY OF MYSORE | Dr. L. S. Bhat, Indian Statistical Institute, (Regional Survey Unit), New Delhi. |
| 33. GEOGRAPHY OF THE PUNJAB | Dr. O. P. Bharadwaj, Prof. & Head of the Department of Geography, Government College, Ludhiana. |
| 34. GEOGRAPHY OF RAJASTHAN | Prof. V. C. Misra, Head of the Department of Geography, University of Jodhpur, Jodhpur. |
| 35. GEOGRAPHY OF WEST BENGAL | Prof. S. C. Bose, Department of Geography, University of Gorakhpur, Gorakhpur. (U. P.) |

Geology

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| 36. GEOLOGY OF INDIA | Dr. A. K. Dey, Senior Specialist (Mineral Resources), Planning Commission, New Delhi. |
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Zoology

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| 37. FISHES | Dr. (Miss) M. Chandy, Principal, Miranda House, Delhi. |
| 38. INSECTS | Dr. M. L. Roönwal, Director, Zoological Survey of India, Calcutta. |
| 39. HUNDRED BIRDS OF INDIA | Mrs. Laeeq Futehally, (under the guidance of Dr. Salim Ali) Bombay. |

Note: Other assignments are being negotiated with eminent authors.

